

時雨沢恵

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白  
ILLUSTRATION KOHAKU KUROBOSHI

キ

の旅

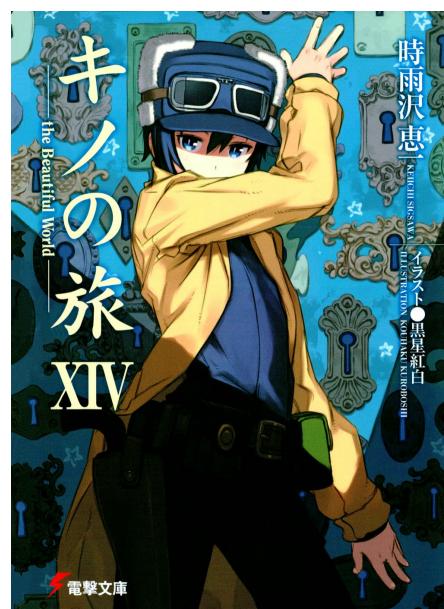
XIV

the Beautiful World



電撃文庫

# Novel Illustrations



—— the Beautiful World ——

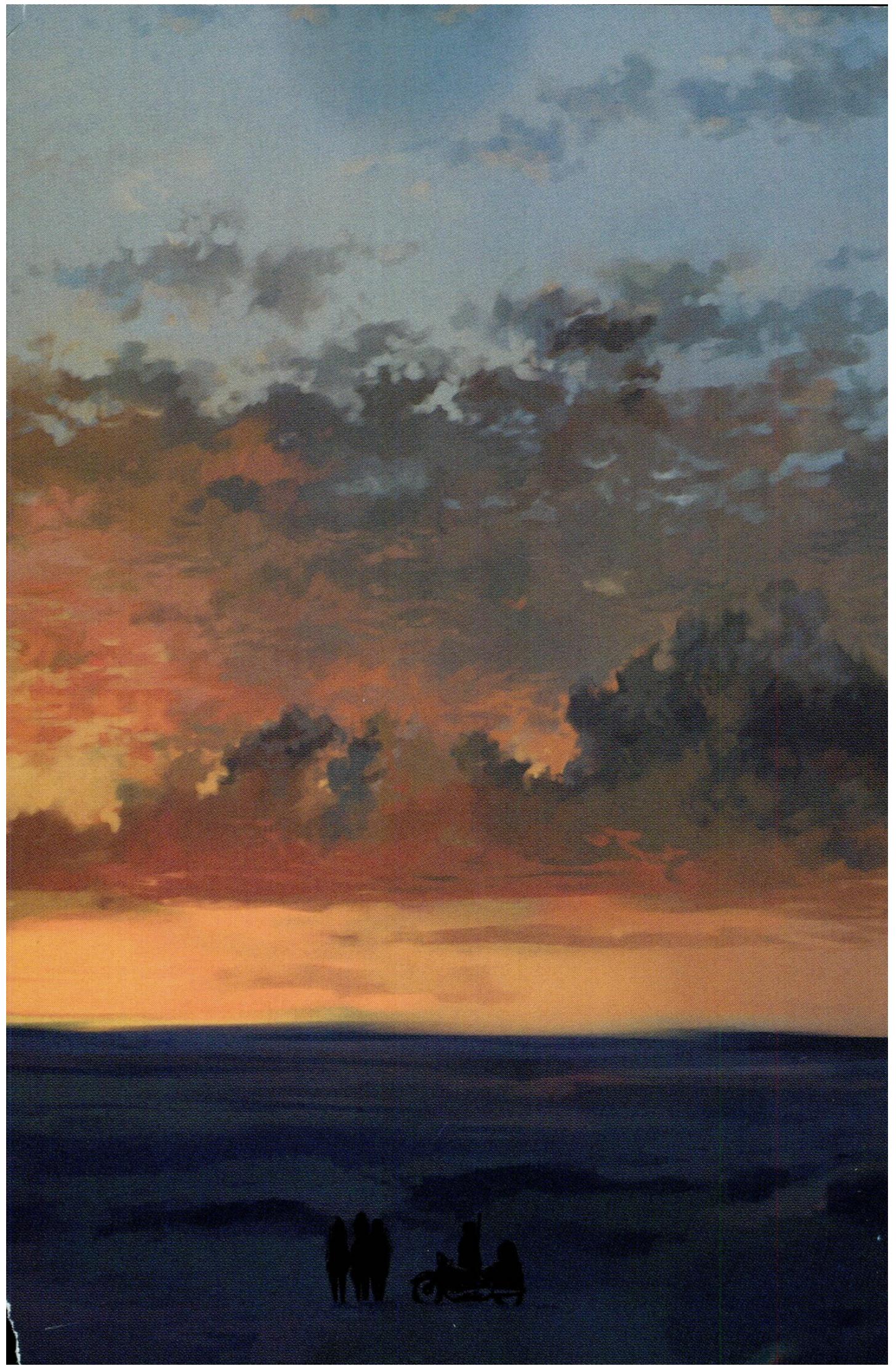
# キノの旅 XIV

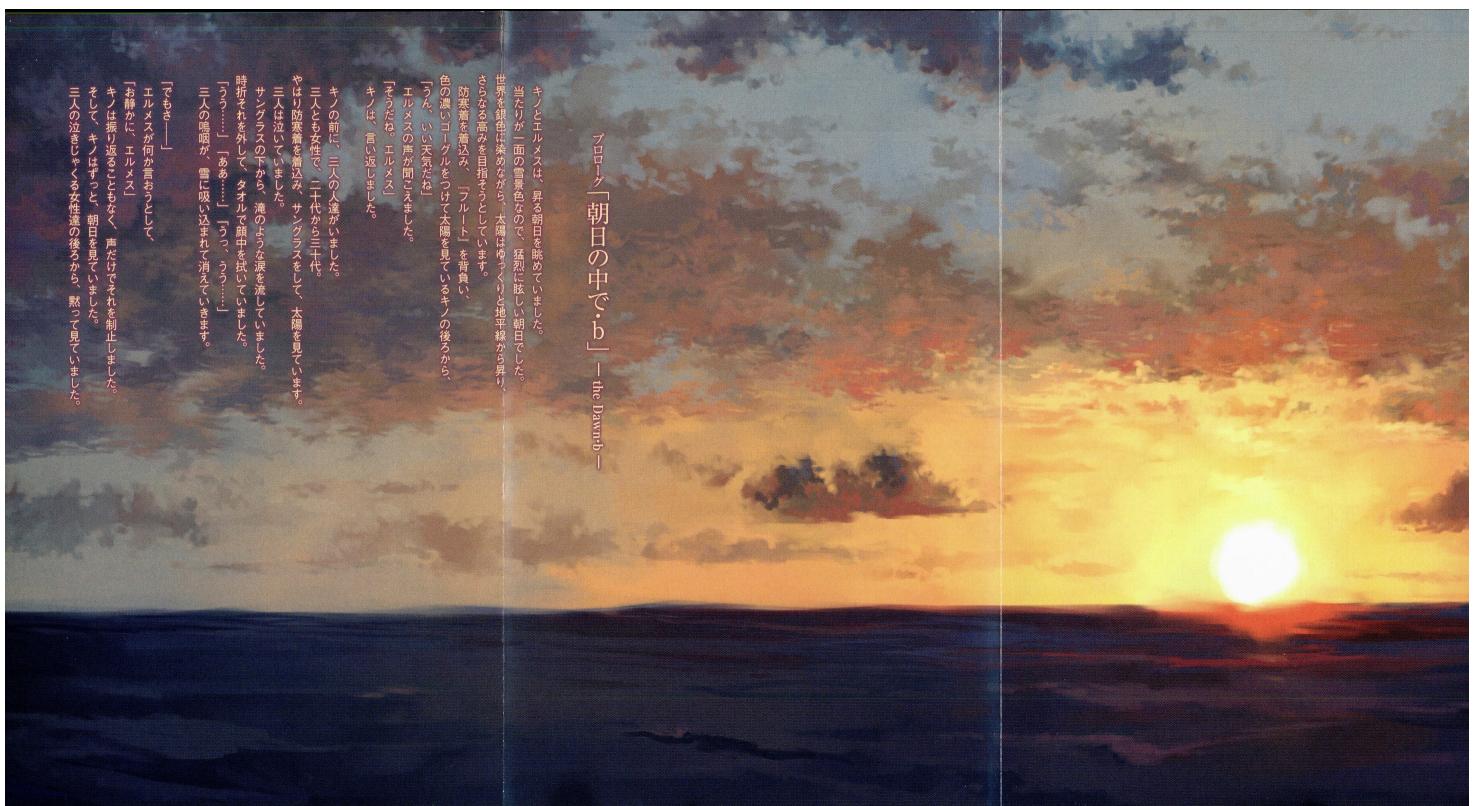


時雨沢恵一  
KEIICHI SIGAWA

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ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI





アートワーク「朝日の中で・b」— the Dawn —

キノとエルメスは、見る朝日を眺めています。

当たりが一面の雪景色なので、猛烈に眩しい朝日でした。  
世界を銀色で染めながら、太陽はゆっくりと地平線から昇り

さらなる高さを目指そつとしています。

防寒着を脱ぎ、「ハルヒト」を着て、  
色の濃いゴーグルをつけた太陽を見ているキノの後ろから、

「うん、いい天気だね」  
エルメスの声が聞こえました。

「そうだね、エルメス。」

キノは、言い返しました。

キノの前に、三人の友達がいました。

三人とも女性で、二代から三世代  
やはり防寒着を脱ぎ、サンゴラスをして、太陽を見ています。

三人は泣いていました。  
サンゴラスの下から、涙のような涙を落していました。

時折それながら、タオルで額中を拭いていました。  
「うう……」「ああ……」「うう、うう……」

三人の母親が、雪に吸い込まれて消えていきます。

「でもさー」

エルメスは何か言おうとして、  
「お静かに、エルメス。」

キノは振ることもなく、声だけそれを制止しました。  
そして、キノはずっと、朝日を見ていました。  
三人の泣きじゃくる女性達の後ろから、黙つて見ていきました。



## 「情操教育の国」— Do What We say! —

むかしむかし、あるところに、一人の旅人がいました。小さな娘はそれを心事でとある國に入りました。旅人は、國の人間がいました。  
「我が國の子供達は、反抗的で暴力的で、正直していない。始末も負えません。人の心を育てる努力で、今まで色々なことを諒してきました。」  
たり、音楽を学ばせており、絵を描かせてみたり。しかし、どれも上手くいきません。旅人さん、何かいい意見はありますか？」

旅人が國を見て回ると、確かに子供達は荒れ放題です。野放団に暮れています。そのため、親や大人が、「どうしてお前らはそんなにバカなんだか！」  
「ぐつぐつの頃の時間も覚えられないのか！」  
「いやから楽器を練習しなさい！ あんたのような出来損ないでもこれらしいさるはずよ！」

「なんだかの無様な絵は！」  
「遊んでいたり、また殴るやつ！」  
「そんなことを怒鳴つてしまつた。子供達を殴つてしまつた。」

そして次日のこと、役に立たない

判断された法務官が変わつて、そちらを子供達が行つた義務がなくなりました。町では、子供達が大變れています。ペットの動物を高じころかで放り投げたり、楽器を床に落つけたり、絵画を火をつけてたり、思い思ひの自由な行動をする。それを止めようと、大人達が子供

達を殴りますが、子供達は止めませんで

しゃべります。それを見ていた旅の二人のうち、國の大・大人達は、反抗的で暴力的で、正直していない。始末も負えません。人の心を育てる努力で、今まで色々なことを諒してきました。

「次はバースナイダー。注、既にこのことを学ばせることで、実弾射撃は集団力を養うのではなく、その大

おお！ とか、それだけ！ 二人の旅はすなはしさと出発してしまいました。

「それつづいて、お師匠さん、分かれてしまふ

ます。」  
「かもねえ！」

「どうぞお前らは、だから云話を聞いていいな

玉ルメスギノが、その國に向かいな

がらそんな云話を聞いていました。

「でもね玉ルメス、確かにホクは師匠の

もので……」

入国審査官は、恥ずかしそうに言っ

ます。

「玉ルメスか、どんなん事件が？」

と容赦

のない追い打ちをかけましたが、答へは

返つきました。

玉ルメスが、どんな事件が？

答えは



それでも入国するのがキノとエルメスです。

すると、国では子供達が、一三二二コと伸びやかに過ごしています。ペットを可愛がったり、楽器を演奏したり、絵を描いていたり、国中に笑顔が溢れています。

それを見守る大人達も穏やかで、叱りとばしたり怒鳴ったり、ましてや手を出している人など誰もいませんでした。

「ふむ……」

キノがあたりを見回して、子供達を優しげな瞳で見つめる初老の男性を見つけました。近づいて自己紹介して、「これほど子供達が明るい国は久しぶりです。どんな教育方針なんですか?」男が答えます。「一言で答えてくれます。

「強制はしない」

エルメスが訊ねます。



「その口号は？」

キノが、謎かけじゃないんだから、と妙

な顔をしていますか 男はそれにも答え  
てくれます。

「強制するしかないからだ。ものを教えるには、強制するしかない。だから、強制しなくなつたんだよ」

「教える立場になつたら、旅人さんにも

分かるよ。教える相手も教える自分も、

「するところか」

「自ら、模範を示さなければならぬん

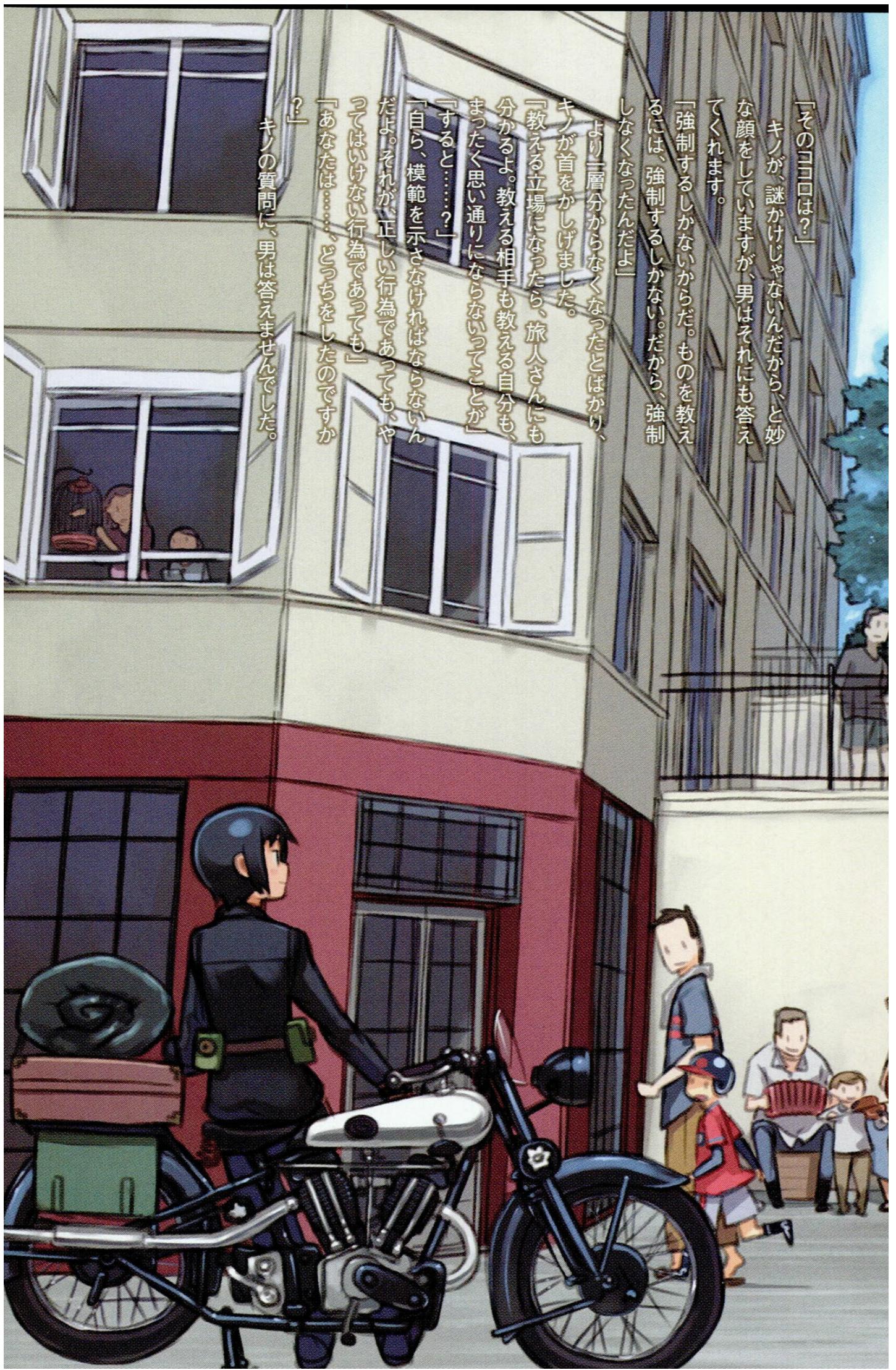
だよ。それが、正しい行為であっても、や

『てはいけない行為であっても』

あなたは……、どっちをしたのですか

キノの質問に、男は答えませんでした。

卷之三





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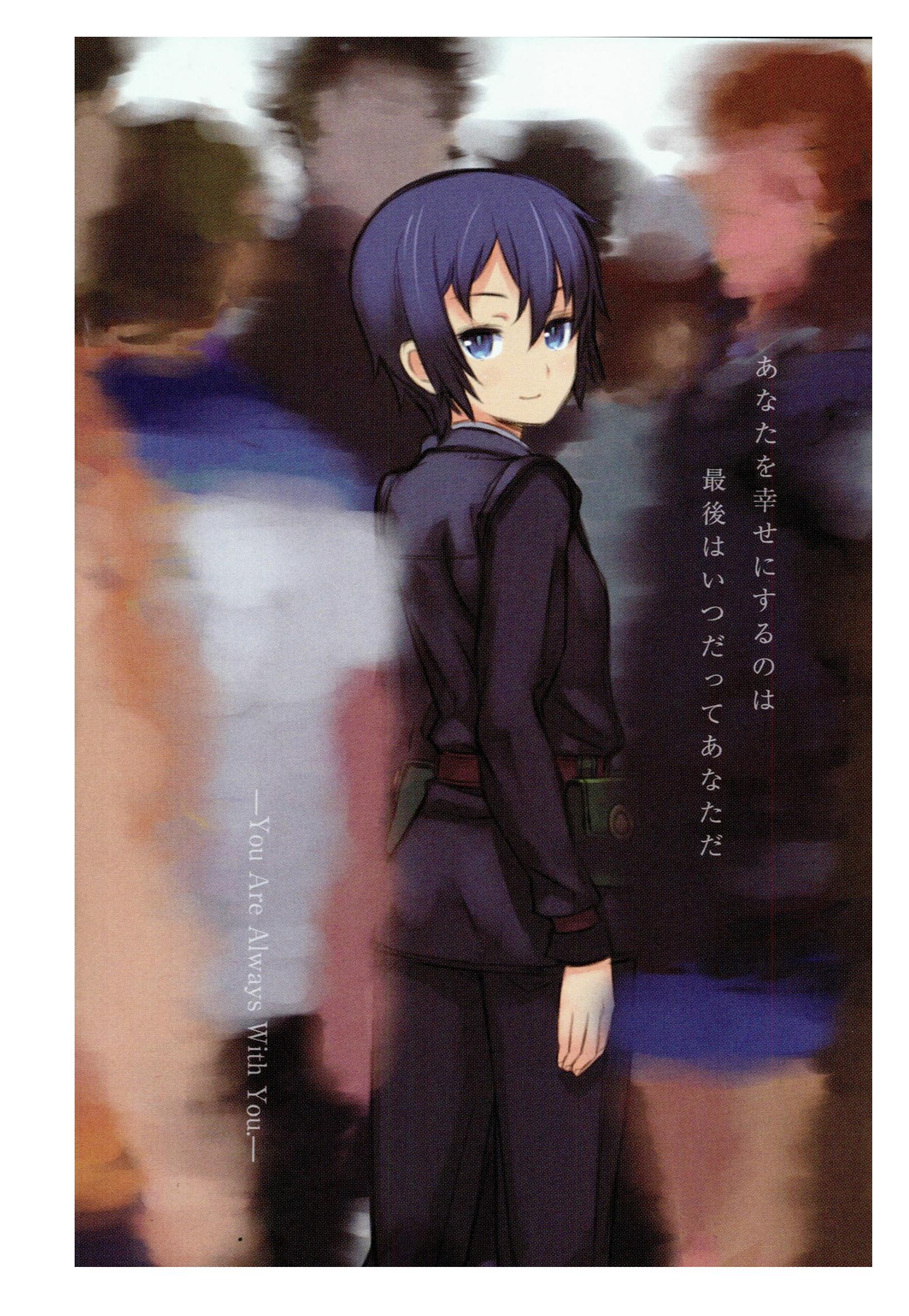
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Design Yoshihiko Kamabe





あなたを幸せにするのは  
最後はいつだってあなただ

—You Are Always With You.—

第二話

# 「呴きの国」

—My Daily Life—







第三話

「規制の国」  
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第四話

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第六話

「亡国の国」  
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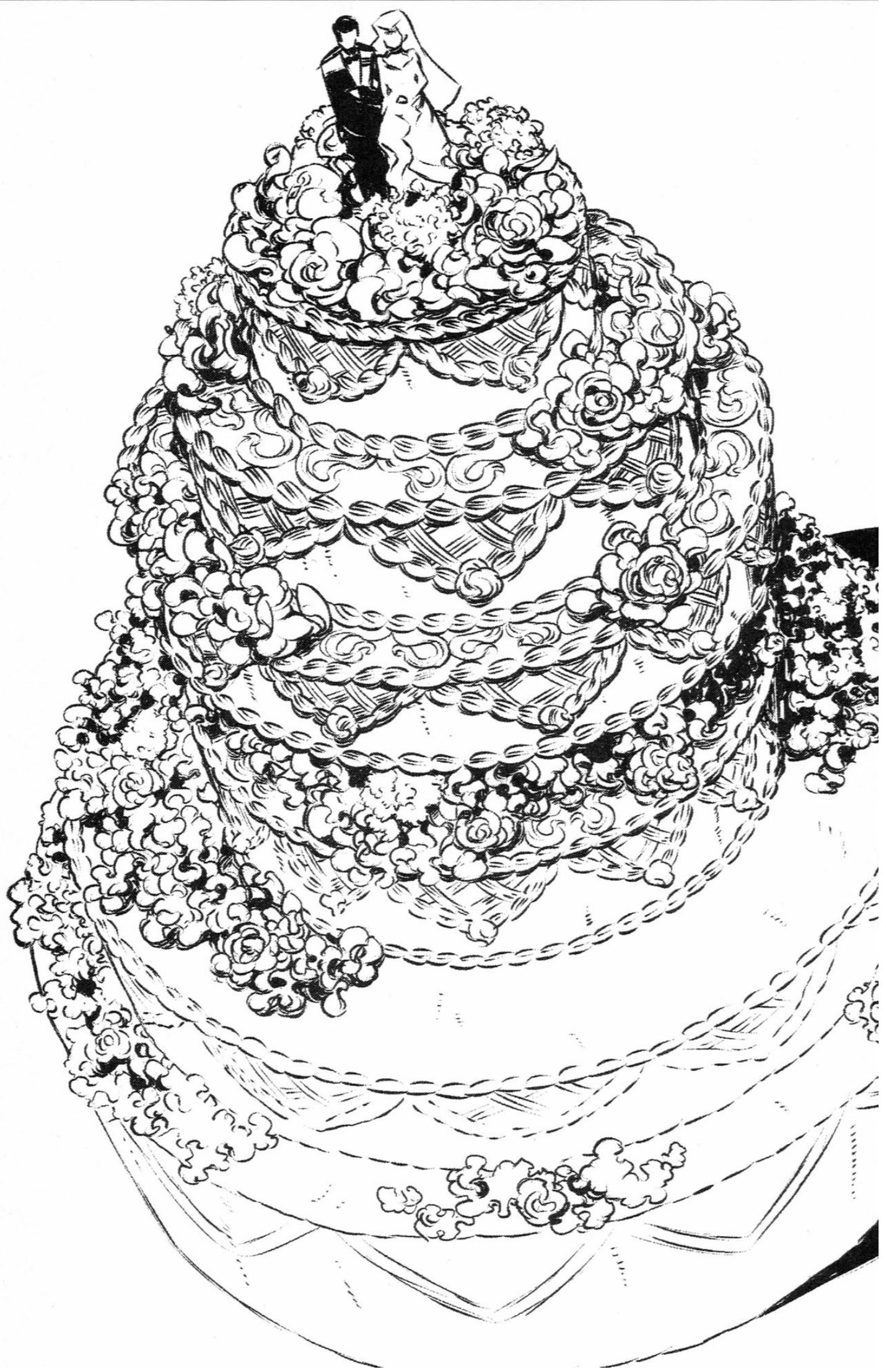


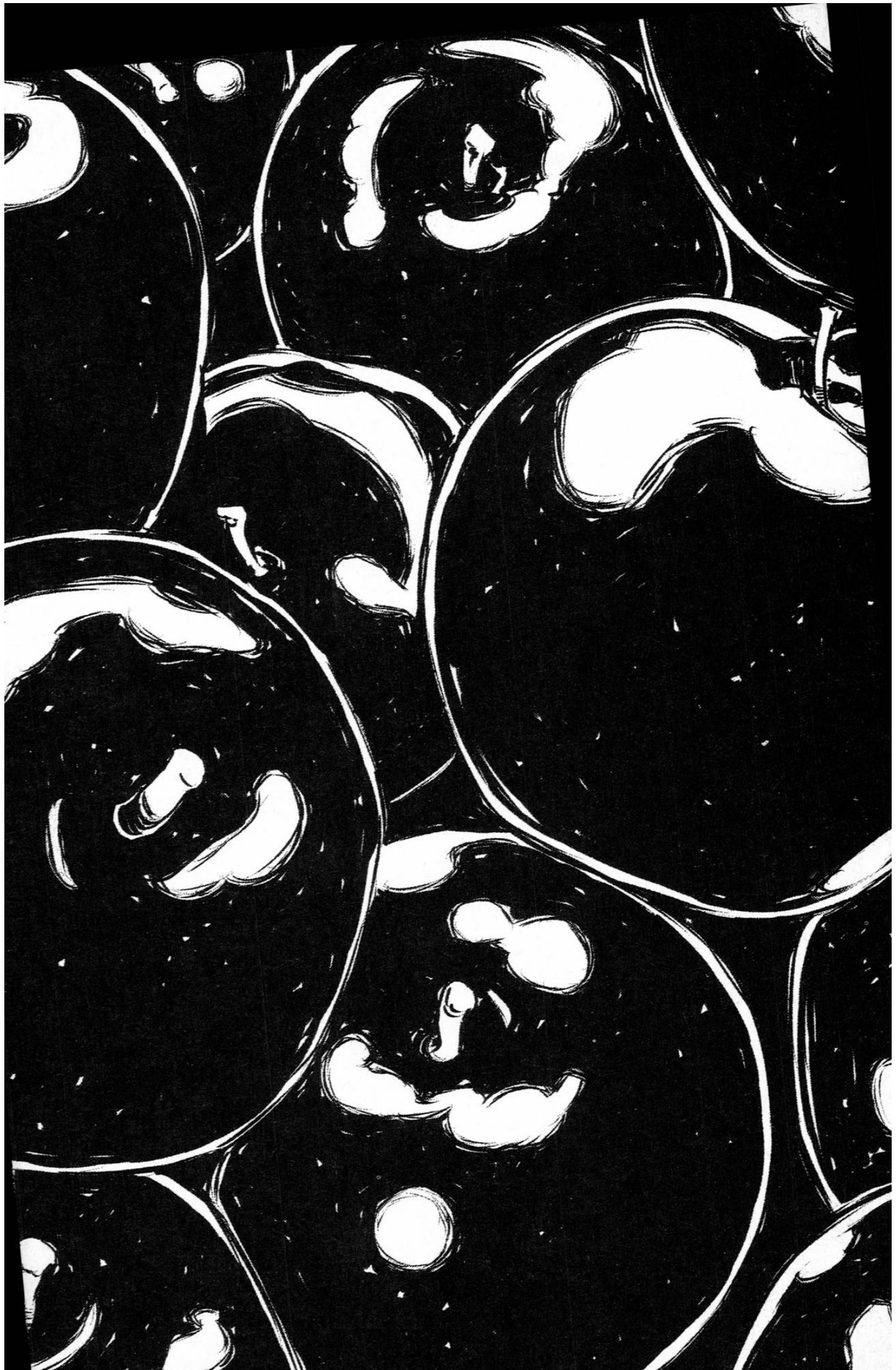




第七話

「結婚の国」  
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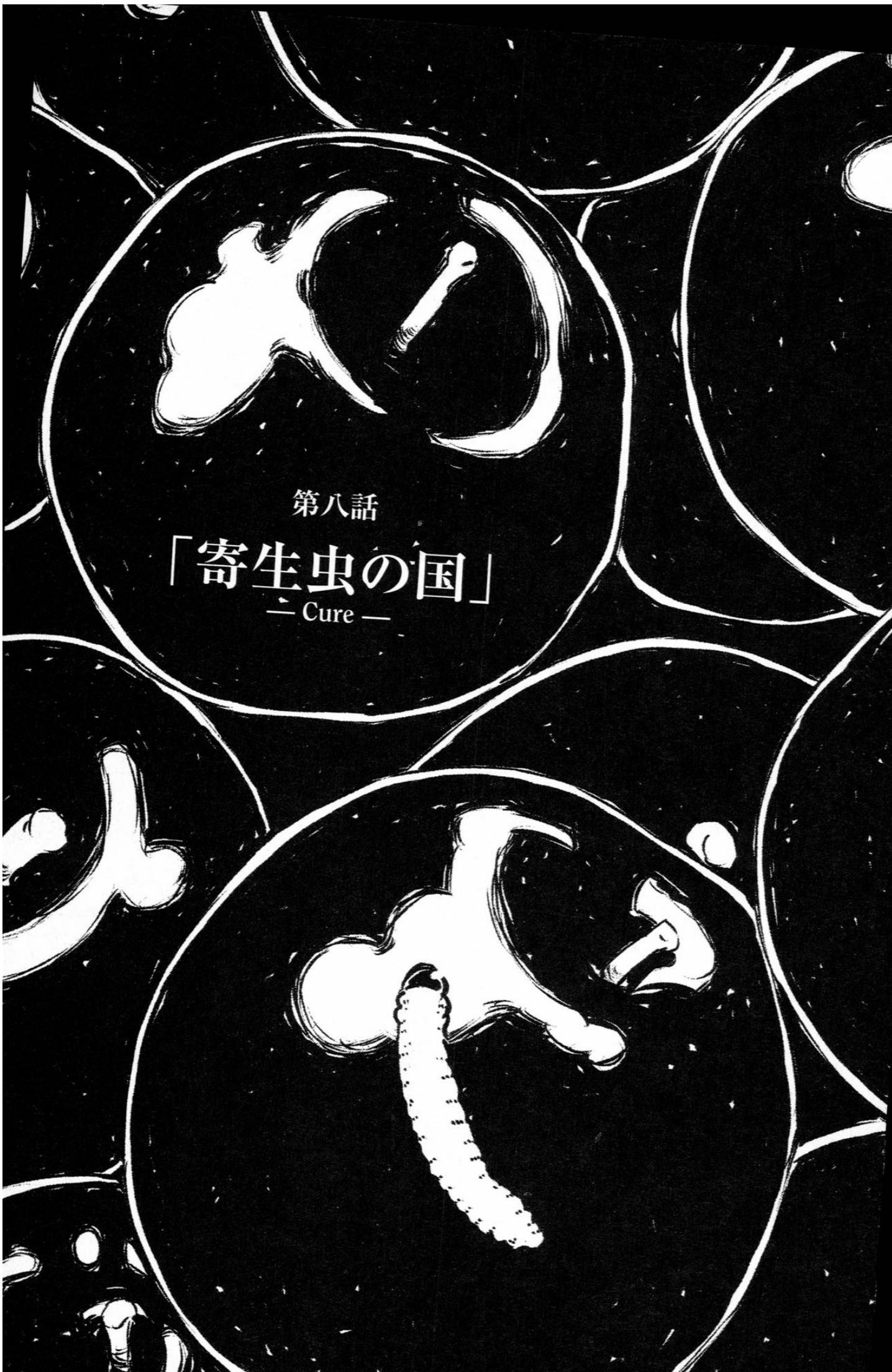




第八話

「寄生虫の国」

—Cure—





第九話

## 「差別をする国」 — We Are NOT Like Us. —





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第十話

「正しい国」  
—WAR=We Are Right!—

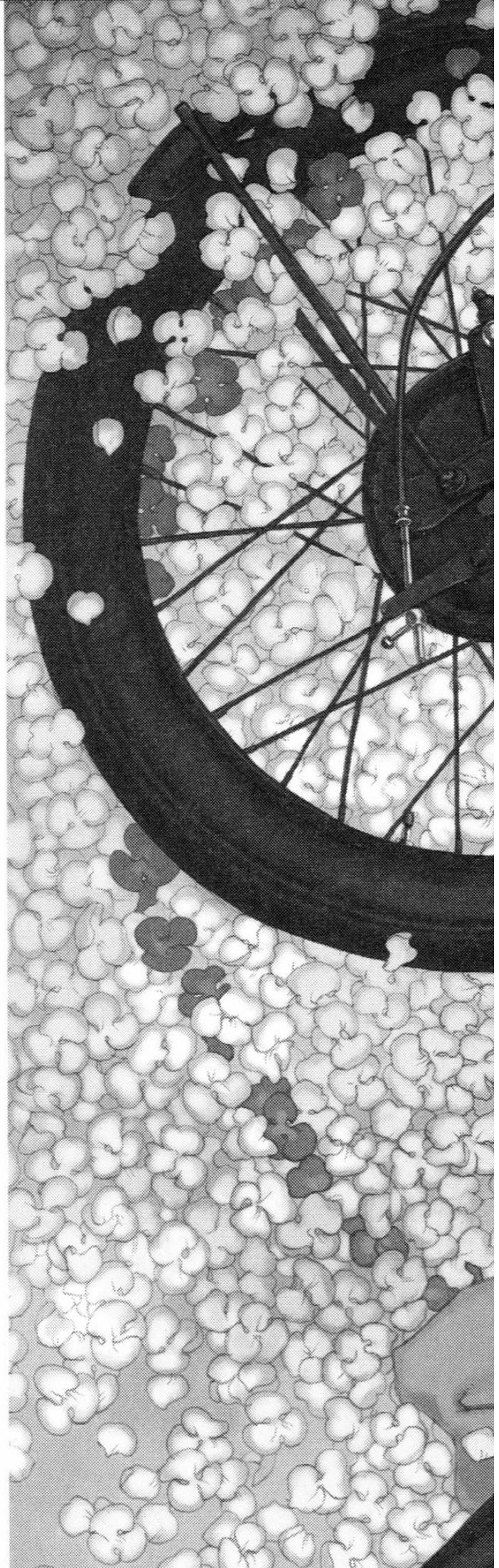




【初出】プレイステーション2用ゲームソフト(2003年7月発売)  
「キノの旅」同梱ブックレットに収録された同タイトルを加筆・修正

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第十一話  
「卑怯者の國」  
—Toss-up—





エピローグ

# 「朝日の中で・a」

— the Dawn・a —



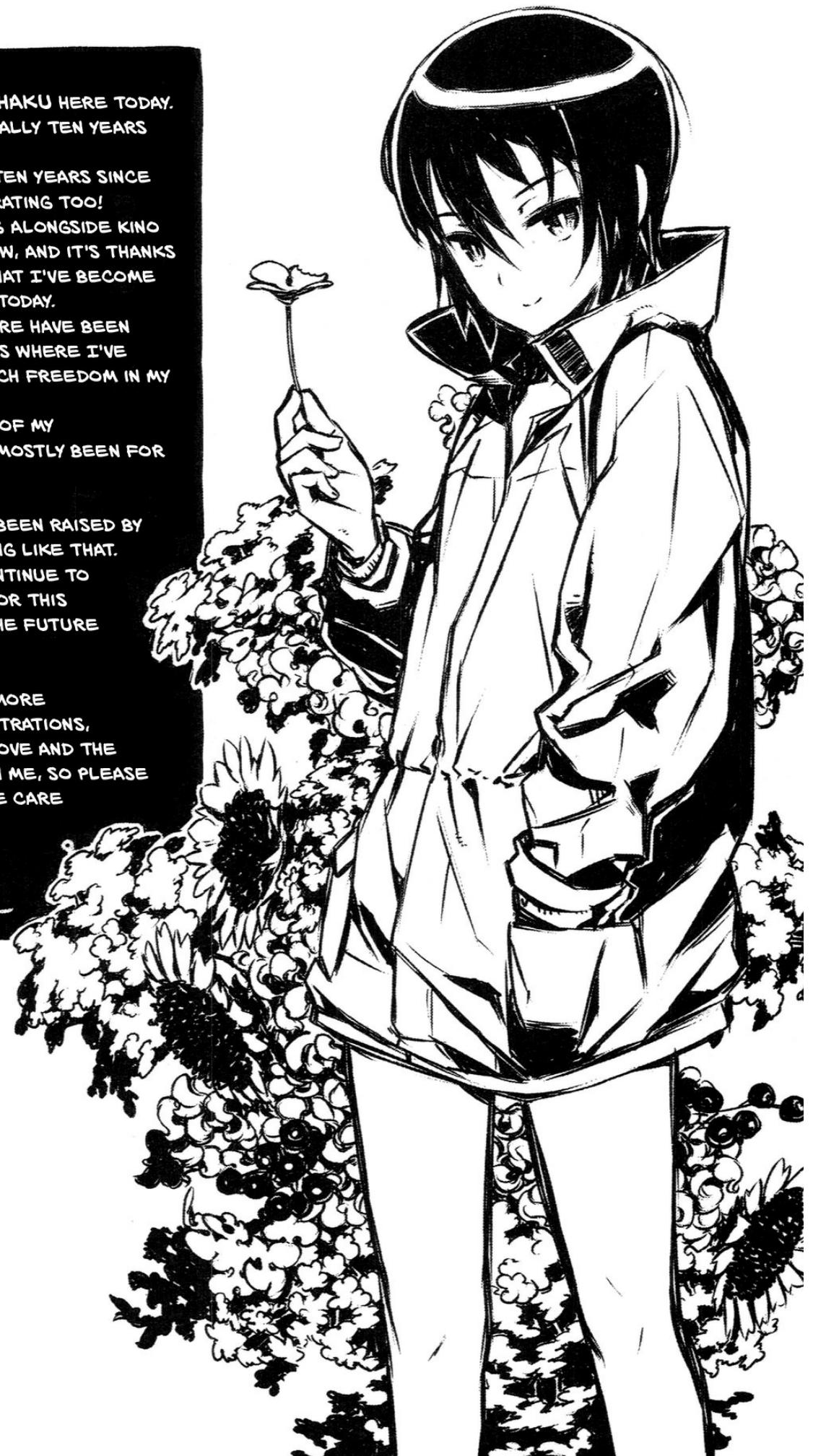
KUROBOSHI★KOHAKU HERE TODAY.  
KINO NO TABI IS FINALLY TEN YEARS  
OLD!

IT'S BEEN ABOUT TEN YEARS SINCE  
I STARTED ILLUSTRATING TOO!  
I'VE BEEN WALKING ALONGSIDE KINO  
FOR TEN YEARS NOW, AND IT'S THANKS  
TO KINO NO TABI THAT I'VE BECOME  
THE PERSON I AM TODAY.  
I DON'T THINK THERE HAVE BEEN  
MANY OTHER WORKS WHERE I'VE  
BEEN GIVEN SO MUCH FREEDOM IN MY  
ILLUSTRATION.  
I THINK THE BODY OF MY  
ILLUSTRATION HAS MOSTLY BEEN FOR  
KINO.

I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN RAISED BY  
KINO, OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT.  
I'M SURE I'LL CONTINUE TO  
FEEL GRATEFUL FOR THIS  
OPPORTUNITY IN THE FUTURE  
TOO.

I WANT TO DRAW MORE  
WONDERFUL ILLUSTRATIONS,  
CHOCK-FULL OF LOVE AND THE  
WORK'S IMPACT ON ME, SO PLEASE  
CONTINUE TO TAKE CARE  
OF ME.

KURO



# “Amidst the Rising Sun · b” —the Dawn · b—

Kino and Hermes were gazing at the rising sun.

As the scenery all around was nothing but that of snow, it was a particularly radiant dawn. While dyeing the world a silver color, the sun slowly ascended from the horizon, as if aiming for the top of the sky.

Kino wore winter clothing on top of her usual clothes and carried ‘Flute’ on her back. She stared at the sun from behind the dark glasses of her goggles.

“Great weather, isn’t it?” Hermes’ voice was heard from behind.

“So it is, Hermes,” Kino answered back.

---

There were three persons in front of Kino.

All of them were women from their twenties or thirties. Like Kino, they wore winter clothing and gazed at the sun with sunglasses.

The three women were crying.

Tears flowed down from underneath their sunglasses like waterfalls.

At times, the tears would splatter, and they would wipe their whole face with a towel.

“Uhu...” “Ah...” “Uhuhu...”

Their tears would get absorbed by the snow and vanish.

—

“But you know—” Hermes initiated,

“Hush, Hermes.”

Without even looking back, Kino cut him short with only her voice.

And Kino gazed at the morning sun for a long time.

She only gazed, silent, from behind the three weeping women.

A long, long time ago, there were two travelers somewhere.

Driving a small car that looked like it was going to break down any moment, the two travelers entering some country were asked this by a citizen:

“The children in my country are really rebellious and violent, and there’s always a never ending mess. For the sake of education, we have asked them to do a lot of things in the past like trying to raise a pet, learning music, and drawing pictures, but none of it works. Travelers, do you have any good advice you can give us?”

The travelers strolled through the country, finding that the children here really were lawless like a horse that escaped from its reigns.

But then –

“Why are you so stupid?! Can’t you even remember when to feed the pet?”

“Stop blathering all this nonsense, hurry up and practice your instrument! In theory, even trash like you should be able to do something so easy!”

“What is this mess that you’re drawing?! If you’re so unfocused, I’m going to give you a wallop again!”

Parents and adults all were scolding or spanking children like this.

Then, the next day, the laws determined to have no use were changed, and the children still had no obligation to comply with the demands.

The result was that the children in the city all rioted; some threw out their

pets from a height, smashed their music instruments against the ground, set their artworks on fire—anyhow, they did whatever they wanted. Although the adults beat up the children to prevent those events, the children still did not stop what they were doing.

After seeing this scene, one of the travelers, a beautiful woman who looked like the stronger of the two, told this to the adults of the country:

“After this, you should let them learn how to use Persuaders (Note: firearms). Firing bullets is the most useful for developing concentration.”

Hearing the adults exclaim “Ooh!” and “That’s it!” the two travelers then hurriedly left the country.

“Master should have said that on purpose, right?”

“It’s possible~”

Hermes and Kino discussed while they headed towards that country.

“But, Hermes, I did learn a lot from Master’s teachings.

“Practice for staying highly alert while sleeping to prevent getting shot at, and keeping calm while continuing shooting even if bullets hit someplace really close by, things like that.”

Soon, they could see the city walls. Hermes said, “I can’t believe it’s still here.”

When Kino and Hermes applied to enter the country, the immigration officer stopped Kino from carrying any Persuaders inside. After asking—

“Because a long, long time ago, a bunch of killings happened inside of my country...” The immigration officer said, a bit embarrassed.

Hermes mercilessly followed up with “What kind of killings?”, but the officer did not reply.

Even then, the two still entered the country.

It turned out that all the children in the country lived happily and easily. They loved pets, played musical instruments and drawing, and the country was brimming with the children’s smiles.

The adults watching this scene to the side were also very composed. They did

not scold or yell, and nobody even spanked any children.

“Hm....”

Kino looked around and saw a man in his early fifties looking tenderly at the children. Kino walked towards him and gave a self introduction.

“I haven’t seen a country with such energetic and happy children before. May I know what sort of education policy your country used?”

The man replied to the question with only one phrase:

“Not force.”

Hermes asked, “That means...?”

Kino made a “that’s not a hint” type of complicated expression, but the man only directed his answer towards that point.

“Because they only knew force. When teaching things to people, we only used forceful moves. So as long as we don’t use force, it’s okay.”

The even more confused Kino could not help tilting her head to show incomprehension.

“Talking from an educational position, I believe travelers will understand as well. Without understanding the person receiving the education and your own self giving the education, it’s impossible to have things go the way you want it to.”

“So...?”

“So no matter if it’s the right action or an action that shouldn’t be done, you have to be a model yourself first.”

“Then you... what did you do?”

The man did not answer Kino’s question.

# “Land of Mutterings”<sup>[1]</sup> — My Daily Life —

[Is this okay? Let's try it.]

[I wonder if it's all right? Testing.]

[It seems to be working somehow. The characters I wrote appeared on the screen.]

[To the one who is looking at... well, reading this—I am a person living in a certain country.]

[Four days ago, a traveler entered our country. Unfortunately, this person died soon after his arrival.]

[He was rather old, and to top it off, seriously ill. Expecting that he will be saved, he probably loosened his guard upon finally reaching this place. It's really sad.]

[We mourned the passing of our guest, and found this device among his belongings. And I am now using it.]

[We do not know this traveler's name or his country of origin. And so we cannot tell his family of his passing. But it doesn't mean I wanted to do that in particular.]

[I was only a bit interested in this device.]

[The manual that came with it says this: “This device enables you to type text within the character limit, and show it to many people all over the world.”]

[I was surprised, as it's the first time I've seen a device like this. Our country has not yet advanced far enough to achieve this kind of technology.]

[I have no idea just how many people are reading this right now. That's because there is nothing indicated in this device except for the characters that I have typed myself. It appears that something else is needed to be able to see

what other people have written. And I don't know what that is.]

[That's fine. I'll just use it as my diary.]

[But if there's somebody who can see this someone, spending each day like this somewhere in this world... that would be nice.]

[My daily life is probably not particularly interesting.]

[It's simply how each day passes by in our country.]

[But I feel rather strange when I imagine that someone gets to know it.]

[I guess that's enough for today.]

---

[It's morning. Today's a day off. It has been a long time since we got to rest for an entire day. From tomorrow onwards, things will get busy again.]

[Noon. My buddies brought down a cow. It probably escaped from a farm. Since they used to be farmers, they handled the meat splendidly.]

[Now, we're surrounding a campfire, feasting on the great meat. We are singing, making merry, laughing. I am having a fun time with my comrades.]

[Today was such a great day.]

---

[It's noon.]

[I have killed twenty-eight people throughout the morning.]

[Those foolish Sgelokultz were completely unprepared. Walking in a file along a narrow road in the middle of a ravine? Unthinkable.]

[My buddies set off the bombs that we laid there in advance. I haven't seen such perfect timing before.]

[The piles of nails that we prepared flied from both sides of the path, boring holes into their bodies.]

[Then we did the usual. We finished off those who wailed from their wounds. There was no need to use bullets. We just swung axes one after another on the lower halves of their bodies.]

[Then we scattered their corpses on the ground. The wild animals will come soon and probably have them for dinner.]

[After that, we took everything that can still be used—their weapons, ammunition and equipment. I was lucky to get one of those automatic assault rifles that are still pretty rare in these parts. It's still in perfect condition, and I'd be able to use it after wiping the blood and the bits of brains off it.]

[We returned to the camp in high spirits. Our lunch was beef again. There's still a lot left.]

[We took four Sgelokultz with us alive, but my buddies are killing them right now, maybe because they couldn't get any useful intel from them.]

[There's a sawmill beside the campgrounds with an electric saw for cutting wood inside. We use that to cut the Sgelokultz lengthwise because it makes splitting bodies into half a breeze.]

[Here's a trick to make someone suffer for as long and as painful as possible. Cut a little, then leave it for a while. I could hear some pleasant screams since a while ago. Looks like our dogs will have full stomachs for two days in a row.]

—

[I was adjusting the sniping rifle since morning. It came with a 400-meter scope. It even has bullets left inside.]

[This was used by one of those Sgelokultz, which means it was a rifle used to kill one of my comrades. But I can't fight this war if I worry about such things. I just have to kill more people than they have.]

[It's now noon. With orders from headquarters, I am to go to town starting from tomorrow. It seems that they don't have enough snipers out there.]

[I wonder if I can use this thing even if I'm in town.]

---

[It's evening.]

[I arrived in town.]

[Seems like I can still use it here.]

[“What’s with that toy?” My buddies teased me. I told them that it’s my lucky charm.]

[I was told about our comrades who died in battle. They were all great people.]

---

[It's morning. A morning greeted with a refreshing blue sky. I'm about to go out to kill.]

[This town's in the front lines. We have taken control of primarily three-fifths of the western side, and the Sgelokultz are in hiding on the remaining areas.]

[It hasn't been too easy for us to overcome the enemy here, and it's one of the areas where we remain to be at a stalemate with them.]

[The Sgelokultz soldiers who are on the defensive can't be seen around, but some elderly and children who had nowhere else to go are still in town. We shoot them on sight.]

[Earlier, an old man came to fetch water. I shot his leg and waited for a bit, but no one came to help him. However, he tried to crawl away when his bleeding stopped after a while so I shot him dead in the chest.]

[This evening, I found a child with his mother. I shot his head, which was cleanly cut off from the rest of his body. His mother turned around, and I could hear her screams clearly even from afar.]

[My fellow sniper told me to spare the mother and let her go home to their house carrying the headless body of the child.]

[I told him that I don't want to have my kill count reduced and shot her anyway.]

[The guy was quite offended, and told me that a sniper should listen to his observer.]

[But when I tossed him an apple during dinner, his mood lifted in an instant. It's a mere twelve-year old after all. I used to be like that too.]

[Evening. Since the power station was under our control, no one dared operate it. The town was completely dark.]

[It was raining. I like rain. That's because sniping becomes less dangerous when it rains.]

---

[Today I killed four. There was a clash in town.]

[One of them was a Sgelokultz sniper. This guy killed a lot of my comrades over the past few days.]

[He had been hiding with a large-caliber rifle within a tall building from afar. It was the perfect place for sniping. Perhaps because of the weight of the rifle, or because he made a tiny change to his aiming angle, the tip of his rifle was exposed a wee bit from the window. That's when I noticed him.]

[I got the help of my comrades to show him a decoy, while I sent a bullet straight to his face.]

[It was a tiny mistake. But mistakes like that can cost your life in the battlefield.]

---

[It's evening. It was a long and harrowing day.]

[The Sgelokultz dug a tunnel in the underground canal and set up bombs. It exploded underneath the building that served as our headquarters.]

[The building was destroyed. We couldn't find twenty-one of our comrades. Everyone was underneath the rubble, including the twelve-year old boy yesterday. At that time I was by chance fetching my luggage from the depot, so I was saved.]

[As a result, we had no choice but to surrender a territory we fought so hard to gain.]

[It's regrettable, but this is part of war. From now on, I will continue to kill those bastards. In the end, we will win.]

[I was reassigned again. This time, I am to join up with the unit defending the gates.]

[I left my automatic rifle in town. Someone might be able to use it. To stain the ground with the stinky blood of those Sgelokultz.]

---

[I will be writing two days' worth.]

[We were on the move the whole time in a truck.]

[On the way, we found some surviving Sgelokultz.]

[They were caught by local vigilantes from a village under our control.]

[We liberated this town two months ago. But that time, some of the Sgelokultz were able hide in the mountains. As they could no longer stand hunger, they came down in search of food, and were caught.]

[There were eight survivors. Of course they were a bunch of old or injured persons and children who couldn't fight.]

[That's because all of those who could were already killed by us.]

[The leader of the vigilantes, a nine-year-old child, asked me what to do. I told him that if he wanted to become an adult, he should come up with an answer on his own.]

[And so the vigilantes beat them up with wooden mallets until they're dead. That's good. We can't let them live. It's best to make them suffer as much as possible.]

[Among the group, there was a five-year-old child who hesitated and couldn't bring himself to kill. He said he couldn't kill a child much younger than himself.]

[I spoke to this child.]

[I told him this: "If you can't do it right now, that old man or child will eventually take up arms. And then they would kill you or your friends. And out of revenge they would even go after your baby. Are you okay with that?"]

[The child killed, crying and screaming the whole time. He beat the head many times until it was turned into a shapeless pulp.]

[That's fine. Right now we are in war, and this is a battlefield.]

[You can show human compassion when the war is over. As much as you want.]

[And this war can only end with our side's victory. Otherwise, the Sgelokultz will kill or turn us into slaves.]

[They never showed us affection, and never considered us as humans. There's no way we can live together with such people.]

[If we want absolute peace, we have no other choice but to fight. Even if it cost us tens of thousands of lives, we will do everything to win. We have no other choice but to kill, be it infants or the elderly.]

[To anyone reading this. You're free to think of me as nothing but a blood-thirsty beast.]

[But there's only one thing I want you to know. It is wrong to think that a murderer in the battlefield is no different from a person who kills in times of peace.]

[After that, the group tried to throw the corpses in the river, so I stopped them. I told them that we might drink the water in that river someday. We wouldn't want to pollute it.]

---

[Morning. Starting today, I will be looking after the defense of the third eastern gate. I was made in charge of a platoon guarding the gates.]

[To be honest, I did not wish to become a captain. Because this area is already under our control, there's almost no fighting at all. Killing Sgelokultz every day suits me better.]

[But since I can't go against headquarters, I obeyed.]

[Our country has many gates; three in each direction. The largest is the one facing the eastern city, which has become our side's capital.]

[The third eastern gate where I was assigned is the farthest north and is also the most distant from the frontlines. It is the first gate that meets the main road, and in the past, served as the gateway to the country.]

[Our job is to deal with foreigners, that is, travelers and merchants, who come to the gates.]

[Of particular importance are the merchants who come to trade weapons and ammunition. Without them, this war can't go on.]

[If the Sgelokultz were here instead, the merchants would have sold them their products as well. In fact, that's what's happening at the western side.]

[It is likely that these merchants who sell us weapons go next to the west, and offer the Sgelokultz the same weapons that will be used against me and my comrades.]

[Both our side and the Sgelokultz use foreign-made weapons. That means the wealth that our country has accumulated through the years flow into other countries.]

[But it doesn't mean that we hold disdain towards the merchants. They are only doing their jobs after all.]

[Meanwhile, there are travelers who come, unaware that the country is currently engaged in a war.]

[Usually, they give up on entering once we explain the circumstances. Then we ask them to come again after we have killed all of the Sgelokultz and the country has turned into a peaceful and wonderful place once more.]

---

[My after-dinner tea was really hot. My tongue got scalded.]

[My subordinates laughed at and teased their invincible captain who couldn't even win against hot water. But it's really great, their smiles. These smiles will bring about our victory.]

[Soon it was evening. Having supervised the tasks and training of my subordinates, a day ended without me having to fire a single shot.]

[I wrote such things during the morning, but the truth is I was lonely. I couldn't settle down without seeing the blood of the Sgelokultz, without hearing their death throes ringing in my ears. I couldn't sleep.]

---

[A tedious morning has gone by. Now it's already past noon.]

[No merchants came.]

[Come evening, a young traveler riding an old motorrad called Hermes

arrived. His name is Kino. Right now, he's talking with my buddies.]

[Kino can't go sightseeing even if he entered the country, but we welcomed him nevertheless. When we told him that, Kino gave us a strange reply.]

[He would like to stay for three days, that is, until the day after tomorrow, even if it's only out here. Perhaps it is to rest, but I have no idea why he was so particular about three days.]

[But we don't have any reason to refuse. And so Kino and Hermes entered the country.]

[All of the buildings that once stood in front of the gates were destroyed. The Sgelokultz burned them down before we subjugated this territory.]

[The barracks and warehouse tents stood in an open area surrounded by forest, roughly two-hundred meters in both length and width. Kino set up his own tent right beside the forest a bit ways off the barracks.

[Evening. I was having a chat with Kino up until a moment ago.]

[To be exact, I was talking with both Kino and Hermes.]

[As I have some to spare, I invited them for dinner. And while we ate, Kino and Hermes asked why we were fighting the Sgelokultz.]

[The answer was simple—because we can't get along with them.]

[I told Kino and Hermes everything.]

[It's a rather long story, but I'll write it here.]

—

[It is true that we lived in this country with the Sgelokultz for as long as we can remember. We once inhabited the same villages, walked the same streets, and shared the same tables in the same restaurants.]

[However, that did not bring about unity among us.]

[We never shared the same lifestyle, and could never completely comprehend

each other's ways.]

[History is our witness. The Sgelokultz believed we can be handled conveniently as slaves, and made us work as such. There's countless of evidence to support this.]

[But we are nothing like slaves, and nowhere near inferior to them.]

[In fact, we are much closer to being perfect human beings. They probably won't admit it to their deaths, but they are an inferior people who aren't capable of civilized living without our support.]

[Eighty percent of the heinous crimes in this country were committed by the Sgelokultz. Majority of the prisoners and death convicts were also among them.]

[The only thing they have an edge in is that they have 'better physiques' than most—but that's it.]

[In terms of intellect, reasoning, endurance, wisdom, and everything else—they are considerably inferior to us. To put it simply, the Sgelokultz are foolish and pathetic creatures.]

[And right now, we are the superior force. One year since the war began, we have gained control of over seventy percent of the country.]

[Those unquestionably inferior Sgelokultz have oppressed us for a long time, and acted as if they were the masters of this country.]

[The Sgelokultz had a monopoly on the most important positions in the government, and created laws to their own convenience. The police and the army also persecuted us in any way they pleased.]

[The ones who hold power are not always in the right. The Sgelokultz reigned over this country like tyrants.]

[And we endured.]

[There are some disgraceful ones who butter up to the Sgelokultz. But they are only a handful. We have always lived proudly.]

[We bore with it, year after year. But those days of suffering have finally come to an end.]

[One year ago, we acquired weapons from foreigners and rebelled. To put an end to the Sgelokultz' oppressive rule. To rewrite our history.]

[It is true that we were the first to make a violent move. And some foreigners would probably criticize us for it.]

[But this is a battle for our continued existence. If we did not shed blood, we will be killed slowly as slaves. No one can renounce a war for survival.]

[At first, the Sgelokultz were caught off guard. But soon they demonstrated their sly nature and began their counterattack. And like this, the war continued without rest.]

[We still have plenty of comrades within the areas under Sgelokultz rule. Our ultimate goal is to save our suffering kin and peacefully govern a country where everyone can live equally.]

[Of course, people will die over the course of this war. Enemies and allies alike.]

[Our population which numbered 600,000 one year ago is now down to 200,000.]

[Even so, the corpses of the Sgelokultz are the glorious fruits of our battle while the deaths of our allies are valuable sacrifices. We don't need a peaceful life as slaves.]

[We will seize victory. And then, we will rebuild this country anew.]

[We will leave behind a few Sgelokultz as slaves, and kill the rest. We can't let the root of evil remain.]

—

[If there is anyone reading this, let me clarify one thing.]

[If in case you have the same attributes as the Sgelokultz, I won't think badly of you. I will neither despise you nor kill you.]

[I reserve that for the Sgelokultz who are living in this country.]

[There exist among the merchants people who are like the Sgelokultz, but we don't harm them. Besides, there are probably countries where human beings with varied traits live together as equals.]

[I hope you don't misunderstand.]

---

[After hearing my explanation, Kino and Hermes said, "We understand very well. Thank you very much," and didn't pry any further.]

[I don't know whether they really understood or not.]

[But I feel that this traveler who looked no more than fifteen shared the same scent as me.]

[That is, the scent of blood.]

[I'm not saying that this person has killed many people.]

[It was the kind of scent of having witnessed death firsthand.]

[And so I took a liking to this traveler, who had eyes that do not turn away from death.]

---

[Morning. I returned to my duties.]

[It's already evening. I'll write down the things that happened today.]

[I took half of my platoon and patrolled the part of the forest-covered mountains. This area was completely under our control. It was only to make sure, and to train my subordinates.]

[They let their guards down because we were far from the front lines. But the truth is, my comrades here are in need of more training. After all, most of them

don't have any actual combat experience, and many of them are old.]

[That's why they were assigned at the rear in the first place. Moreover, we have very few automatic rifles like the ones used in the front lines. Almost all of our weapons are old-style bolt-action types that need to be reloaded manually for each shot.]

[In the evening, I had dinner once more with Kino and Hermes.]

[Kino spent time with my subordinates the whole day. I asked for his opinion about their combat skills.]

[Kino answered a little bit too honestly. "At this rate, they won't be useful in the front lines. If there was actual fighting, all of them would get killed," he said.]

[Unfortunately, I have the exact same thoughts.]

[I hardened my resolve.]

[From now on, I would increase my kill count even by just one, so that the number of people killed among my comrades would get reduced, even if only a little.]

[From tomorrow onwards, I will be strict in training them. So that all of them survive to see the new country.]

[Someone once said, "The sweat you shed in training will reduce the blood shed during battle."]

[Early morning tomorrow, Kino and Hermes will be leaving the country. Once I see them off, I will begin the training.]

[I am writing this just before going to bed. It's a peaceful night.]

— —

[It's evening right now.]

[I am the only one remaining here.]

[My subordinates, who were well and alive just last night, were all killed. By the Sgelokultz.]

[I was the only one who survived.]

[Thanks to Kino.]

---

[From here on, I will write everything that happened on this day. If I were to get killed someday, I would like someone to remember.]

[About what happened today, and about Kino.]

---

[Everything began in the morning.]

[The sky quickly grew brighter. When I awoke, Kino was already up beside his tent, trying to wake Hermes up by beating his tank.]

[It was a clear and terribly chilly morning, as was typical of the cold season.]

[I put on my winter coat on top of my combat uniform and utility belt. As there was still time until the sun rises, I thought I could take it off later if I begin my training immediately. It was a casual deed that would save my life later on.]

[I joined up with the guards on the gates and received no reports of any irregularities. While drinking tea and talking about today's plans, I received a report from the guards of the arrival of the merchants.]

[There are no detailed arrangements of when the merchants would come. The guards outside checked their belongings and confirmed that they only contained food. Then after making sure that there were no Sgelokultz or foreign soldiers around, we opened the gates, as was usually done.]

[But this was a terrible mistake.]

[Three trucks entered the gates. There were three persons in the cab of each truck. As soon as the trucks are inside, the gates were closed. And then everyone lined up to unload the trucks. The faster they finish unloading, the earlier the merchants can be sent home.]

[At that time, the only ones who weren't near the trucks were me, who went to my tent to get the transaction documents, the people on night duty who were sleeping in the barracks...]

[And lastly, Kino, who has already given up on waking Hermes and proceeded on folding his tent.]

[The merchants looked like merchants at first glance. They wore different clothing. They carried themselves differently from our countrymen. This was another mistake.]

[I was looking at them. The nine merchants held tiny boxes with one hand. Those boxes looked like pouches from afar. Not I or my comrades who were unloading the goods would think that those boxes could turn into deadly weapons.]

[As I casually turned around, I saw it with my own two eyes. How the merchants simultaneously transformed those boxes.]

[With one hand, they split the boxes into two pieces, and rotated the lower portion backwards. This part became a shoulder stock, while the grip and the magazine protruded from below. An innocent-looking box turned into a persuader in a moment.]

[The merchants began firing with these weapons. Directed towards my comrades, whose hands were busy with their work.]

[There was no way for them to fight back. It's as if being shot by someone close enough to tap your shoulder. Like being executed by a firing squad from behind.]

[*Bang. Bang.* For each faint shot I hear, one comrade would hit the ground. The movements of the merchants were precise. They worked in pairs, angled in a way so that they wouldn't hit each other. And one by one, they shoot my comrades to death.]

[My comrades who were lined up to unload the trucks were like targets for shooting practice.]

[Some of them had rifles slung on their backs. But faster than they could put down the goods and grab their rifles, they were shot point blank to their faces, and fell.]

[Of course these people are not merchants. They are Sgelokultz.]

[I heard that they formed a special force from former soldiers, who performed covert operations in small groups. That must be it.]

[They dared kill or restrain the merchants that served as their lifeline. Then they took their clothing and trucks loaded with merchandise, and attacked our gate.]

[Their ultimate goal must be to gain control of this area, and attack us from behind by dispatching soldiers from outside the gates. It was, most certainly, a surprise attack.]

[I dropped down the minute I heard the first shot. That time, I only had the automatic hand persuader on my hip, and had no rifle with me. But even if I had one, I wouldn't be able to aim at the Sgelokultz taking cover at the other side of the truck.]

[I lay on the ground and grit my teeth, while the number of people standing ten meters ahead of me was reduced one by one. My comrades were being shot down. Some of them bravely flung their burden at their attackers. But they were seized, kicked down to the ground, and shot on the head.]

[In the past the Sgelokultz would take along some of our allies alive to make into slaves. At the frontlines, there are plenty of cases where we couldn't find the bodies of our comrades. But this time, they intend to wipe us out.]

[Not a minute has passed.]

[All of my comrades around the truck were gone. All dead. The Sgelokultz robbed the corpses of their rifles. Four of them watched the surroundings from the shelter of the truck, while five proceeded to the barracks.]

[To kill my comrades in their sleep most likely. As shooting practice is not

uncommon in the morning, it was not surprising that the sleeping ones did not notice the attack. Again and again, I heard muffled shots from within the tent.]

[But this was my only chance. I got up and raced to my tent only ten meters away. There a rifle is waiting.]

[And I was immediately shot down. There was no way that I couldn't be seen in such an open area.]

[A searing pain raced through my shoulder and leg, and all sound vanished from my ears. I collapsed forward and lost consciousness.]

---

[When I came to, I was already inside the forest.]

[I was lying face up on my spread out coat beside a big tree, looking up at the sky and the treetops.]

[At that instant, I felt a terrible pain on my back and leg. It was as if a branding iron was being pressed on my back or a finger being stabbed into an open wound. I groaned, and heard a voice from nearby telling me to hush.]

[I moved my head towards the voice. It was Kino.]

[A black-jacketed Kino was hiding, bent down next to a tree. He approached me, maintaining a crouching position.]

[Kino quickly told me everything in a whisper.]

[That we were currently ten meters into the forest roughly two hundred meters away from the gates.]

[That Kino carried me to this place. That I was shot at the back, behind my hip, and at my leg all at the same time. And that there was a huge bump on my forehead]

[I heard about my own circumstances from someone else.]

[My hip was hit by a bullet from a powerful rifle.]

[My utility belt included a pouch with spare bullets inside. The rifle bullet hit this pouch and sent the spare bullets flying while it changed course, and tore a long gash of skin on my flank.]

[But because of that, it didn't enter my body. Only three centimeters more, and the bullet would have pierced me through, rupture my internal organs, the shock from which killing me in an instant.]

[The wounds on my shoulder and leg were caused by 9-mm rounds used for hand persuaders. These bullets are much less powerful than a rifle's.]

[They probably came from those strange folding persuaders. My left shoulder was shot, leaving my left arm unable to move. Another bullet carved itself at the back of my thigh.]

[But both wounds did not turn fatal. The pressure bandages Kino applied on the wounds helped immensely in stopping the bleeding.]

[Meanwhile, the bump on my forehead was something I got when I collapsed after being shot. I hit my head on a stone and the impact made me lose consciousness.]

---

[The moment the slaughter began, Kino dove into the forest.]

[Then he observed everything until the ruckus settled down. Including the part where my comrades are being killed, as well as my getting up and running, and being shot from behind.]

[The ones who fired at me did not come to confirm their kill, that is whether I'm still alive or not. It seems that they heard shots coming from the guard post. They must have exchanged fire with my comrades outside the gates.]

[It was only a moment that the Sgelokultz focused somewhere else. But Kino used it as an opportunity to carry me into the forest.]

[As I listened to this story, I realized how terrifyingly lucky I have been.]

[That the rifle bullet was deflected by my pouch.]

[That my attackers did not notice that because I was wearing a thick coat.]

[That I lost consciousness from hitting my head, and looked as if I died in an instant.]

[And finally... that I was saved by a brave human called Kino.]

[It was one luck on top of another that made me survive.]

[I asked Kino to read my wristwatch for me. All sensation was gone from my left arm, and I couldn't move it.]

[A mere twenty minutes has passed since everything began. The sky became cloudy in an instant, and the sun that should have risen already was nowhere to be seen.]

[When I asked Kino about the situation, he told me that the gate was still open. The three trucks were transferred outside the country, and that there was nothing else visible in front of the gates other than the tents, the cargo, and corpses.]

[The Sgelokultz must be outside. They're probably waiting for the arrival of reinforcements. Those reinforcements must have stayed somewhere not visible from the gates, and must now be hastily heading towards it.]

[Nine is too small a force. If by off chance my comrades retaliate with more people, they probably plan to close the gates and escape.]

[If that happens, no evidence will remain of what they did here and how they managed to break in. They'll probably use the same strategy again, when they see an opportunity.]

[I desperately thought about what I should do.]

[There are no remaining options for counterattack. I'm alone, with a body that isn't even capable of walking, and only has a functioning right arm.]

[To make matters worse, my only weapon is the hand persuader on my hip and the two spare magazines in my pouch. That is, forty-five 9-mm rounds are all that I have to fight with.]

[The longest range for a hand persuader is around 50 meters. And even if it reaches that, getting a hit is a deed next to impossible. It simply stands no chance against the 300-meter range rifles that those nine soldiers have.]

[Our rail cars, trucks, and four-wheel drives were still parked beside the barracks. They probably didn't destroy or set on fire on them for fear of alarming our side with smoke. We have a supply depot two mountains ahead, and the smoke can be seen from that place.]

[But as I am now, there's no way for me to drive these vehicles to escape there. I'll probably be shot once I approach the cars. Those Sgelokultz must be keeping a close eye to what's happening within the gates.]

[My only hope is Kino, who can still move. If he goes through the forest, he can contact my allies in under an hour.]

[But will there be enough time for that? If the Sgelokultz reinforcements enter the gates, it will be hard to recapture this area. And then, this place will become an infiltration point, and my comrades will be attacked from behind.]

[Up to this point, both sides have engaged in combat only within the confines of the walls. That's because if the war extended beyond them, neither of us could cope too well. But taking control of gates is a different matter entirely.]

---

[To tell the truth, at that moment, I was contemplating of facing the Sgelokultz single-handedly, and die in action.]

[But even if I satisfy myself that way, my allies will be the ones to suffer later on. It's not something a soldier should think about. I can't give up until the end.]

[To attain complete victory, I need to annihilate or chase away the Sgelokultz, and close the gates. But I don't have the power to do that as I am now.]

[At this point, Kino was looking at my face. He had a calm, almost peaceful expression.]

[He asked me what I had in mind. But I did not have an answer to that. "I knew it," Kino said.]

[And I finally realized why Kino did not escape on his own. There was only one reason why he didn't leave me behind even though he could. His motorrad.]

[What about Hermes? I asked. And Kino answered with a carefree voice.]

[“Still asleep, probably,” he said.]

[Just before Kino escaped to the forest, he covered Hermes with a tent and ran away with only his bag in hand.]

[Hermes, who had been concealed with a dirty cover, would look something that belongs to a storehouse from afar. The Sgelokultz would overlook him because they don't have the luxury of time to care about such things.]

[And so Hermes is still parked in one corner of that open area before the gates. But then again, retrieving him is no easy task.]

[Even if he were a mere traveller, if he revealed himself in this kind of situation, it is unlikely that they would just let him escape. There is a high chance that he would be killed to seal his mouth.]

[And so inside this forest, Kino and I ended up in the exact same boat, albeit for completely different motives.]

—

[Kino offered me some portable rations. I was told before that this clay-like food is well-known among travelers for its nutrient-rich, but at the same time disgusting flavor.]

[I devoured it greedily. I have yet to eat anything for the day, and I had lost a great deal of blood. After eating, my body felt warmer little by little, and my resolve seemed to have been renewed.]

[I did not cease thinking. What can I possibly do to fight back? That's all that ran through my head.]

[In hindsight, Kino was staring at me all throughout. And noticed it the moment I was burning with the desire to fight.]

[“There’s only one way,” Kino said.]

[There’s only one way to bring down the nine attackers and protect the gates and Hermes without any of us dying.]

[But of course, it will be dangerous. And all the more for me.]

[I immediately answered: Tell me. I’ll do anything.]

—

[As I remained lying down, Kino showed me a rifle.]

[It was a rifle I have never seen before. It was slim, with a wooden stock, a detachable magazine and a sniper scope.]

[There was a cylinder attached at the tip of its barrel. It was a silencer (a device that suppresses the sound of the shot). It considerably weakens the sound of the fire, and helps conceal the location of the sniper.]

[It belonged to Kino. It fit into the bag because it can be disassembled into two parts.]

[This rifle was hence added to our weaponry. With this, we can fight from 300 meters away. However, this is still not enough to fight against nine men. Kino should know that very well.]

[And so Kino continued.]

[“Be my decoy,” he said.]

—

[After I heard Kino’s plan, I quickly answered.]

[Fine, I'll do it.]

[I might die. But that's much better than not trying.]

[I stretched out my right hand, and Kino gripped it back.]

---

[“Your timing will be one hundred seconds.” Leaving me those words, Kino ran into the forest with the rifle in hand.]

[While slowly counting, I began to crawl with my right arm and left leg.]

[My left arm couldn't feel a thing, while my shoulder and right thigh burned in pain. Even so, my heart leaped at the thought of killing the Sgelokultz.]

[I prudently proceeded on a quiet crawl towards the end of the forest, and concealed myself behind the trunk of the thickest tree nearby.]

[The view opened before my eyes. Two hundred meters in front, I could see the gates, still open. I could see the corpses of my comrades and the barracks tent beside them.]

[One hundred seconds passed.]

[I drew my automatic hand persuader from my hip. I put it down for a moment, took the spare ammunition from the pouch on my waist and placed them on the grass in front of me.]

[Three magazines, that is, forty-five rounds, are all that I have. But these shall be my fangs. Fangs that will sink into the throats of the Sgelokultz.]

[I raised my persuader with my right hand and held it out from the right side of the tree trunk. With just one hand, my aim was rather rough.]

[If I press the persuader against the tree, the slide's motion will be obstructed, causing the bullets to jam. And with just one useful hand, I cannot afford to have that.]

[I aimed at the gates and slowly raised the persuader. The bullet will trace a

mountain-like trajectory, and hopefully, reach the gates.]

[It's not a distance that a human can realistically aim from, but there's no need for that.]

[I have already begun my operation. I fired.]

---

[There was a shrill shot. I fired three times in succession, and three empty cartridges danced in the air.]

[The bullets hit the walls.]

[I glared at the walls with my right eye. The shots should have been audible, and it should be easy to realize that the bullets hit the walls.]

[And as expected, the Sgelokultz appeared.]

[Four of them first crossed the gates while stooping down with utmost care. In their hands were the rifles that they stole from my comrades. While providing support to each other, they quickly came out of the gates and ran at full speed towards the nearby tent.]

[The remaining five followed in a similar manner. Now that's all of them. It's just as we anticipated. In their desire to preserve the strength in numbers, every single one of them would deal with me.]

[I fired once more. The shots hit nothing, but I fired anyway. Five shots in a row.]

[The Sgelokultz were beside the tent. I couldn't see them from my position, but I let loose seven more bullets. There's no need to aim.]

[When the last round was released, the slide of the persuader locked back. As soon as I drew my hand away, bullets came towards me along with their deafening roar.]

[The rifle bullets flew at a speed faster than sound, and struck with a shockwave like that of a whiplash. The noise could be heard from both sides,

while grass and earth danced about. Several bullets hit the trunk of the tree that served as my shield, sending chips of wood in the air.]

[Still bent down, I changed my magazine. The next fifteen rounds. I have thirty rounds left in all.]

[I can no longer move from this place. The moment I show myself from behind this trunk, I would probably be instantly turned into a honeycomb. I can only expose my hand and fire without aiming.]

[As soon as the firing paused, I returned two rounds. Twenty-eight left.]

[It was a tempest right beside me. Over ten shots came without rest, shaking the ground where I lay. The bullets that go back and forth within thirty centimeters from my head gave me a terrible headache.]

[But I fired, making sure that only the tip of the persuader was showing from the tree. I fired back amidst the violent barrage. I spent thirteen rounds in a manner that can't be described as anything other than a waste of bullets.]

[As I didn't have earplugs, my own firing hurt my ears without mercy. I soon lost hearing from my right ear, and a piercing buzz resonated in my left ear, accompanied by pain.]

[My body ached, and the wounds on my shoulder and thigh began to bleed once more. I could feel my body getting wet with blood.]

[The onslaught intensified.]

[The bullets attacked, as if possessing a will to end my life. It felt like each shake of the thick tree chipped away at my life.]

[But I managed to change the magazine one last time, and pounded away with only my hand exposed from the tree. Fifteen left. I fired away, no longer keeping count.]

[As the final bullet flew away, the slide locked. This persuader is now useless, except for throwing at or for clobbering the enemy.]

[At almost the same time, the shootout between me and the nine came to an abrupt end.]

[The stormy echo from the volleys ceased, and silence was restored.]

[Only the flute-like ringing in my ears remained.]

[I have no idea how things turned out.]

[I waited, bearing the pain. Quite some time had passed when my hearing began to come back, and my ears caught the sound of footsteps.]

[I no longer moved. To be exact, I could no longer move.]

[The owner of those footsteps spoke to me in a loud voice.]

[“It’s over,” it said.]

[It was Kino.]

---

[I walked, borrowing Kino’s shoulder.]

[We approached the walls where the corpses of my comrades, and of the Sgelokultz, lay.]

[Behind the tent, in front of the gates, lay all nine of the Sgelokultz, dead from a shot at the side of their heads. Of course, it was all Kino’s doing.]

[Kino’s plan worked perfectly.]

[I acted as bait. While the intense exchange was going on between me and the Sgelokultz, Kino hid by the side of the forest and sniped at them using his rifle equipped with a silencer. That was all.]

[The Sgelokultz mistook me for the one sniping at them. And they desperately fired back, failing to notice Kino even more. As they deliriously fired at me, they were slaughtered from behind.]

[They panicked, believing that a single person was taking them down so easily. According to Kino, the last person was shot as he tried to escape towards the gates.]

[Kino told me everything without any hint of excitement. “It went well,” he said.]

[When I asked how many bullets he spent, Kino's answer was 'nine'.]

[In short, even though faced with the danger of being exposed, Kino was able to send one sure-kill bullet to each of their heads. I'm truly impressed.]

[We walked together up to the gates.]

[Then I asked Kino to move the trucks inside the gates. This will be the undeniable proof of this barbaric act of the Sgelokultz. If we just leave them outside the gates, they will probably be taken away.]

[Kino told me that he had not driven a car for a long time. And so I taught him how to do it, and Kino agreed to try.]

[And even though it was rather shaky, the three trucks managed to cross into the gates. Then I operated the device that controlled the gates, and closed them.]

[After that, Kino ascertained my condition. Using the medical supplies from the tent, he disinfected and bandaged my wounds. He removed the bullets from a rifle and made me use it as a crutch.]

[I asked Kino to look for survivors, or check if the wireless radio was still working, but Kino shook his head.]

[And asked, "Will you open the gates for me?"]

[When I asked Kino if he has to leave already, he nodded. I would have liked him to stay longer, but I can't involve him any further than this.]

[I requested Kino two things. First, for him to get some gasoline from the trucks and set aflame some old tires and scraps of wood to serve as a beacon for my allies.]

[Second, I asked permission to write about him in this device.]

[Kino seemed puzzled for a moment, but eventually replied indifferently, "Well, it doesn't matter." Then he added,]

[“Can that device really send your message across to others?”]

[I didn't know.]

[Kino left the country with Hermes.]

[But before they departed, Hermes managed to jest. "That was some trouble you've got yourself into," he said, as if praising someone for shoveling snow on a winter day.]

[And Kino retorted that he wouldn't have been involved if only Hermes woke up early as scheduled.]

[I was astounded. Indeed, if that were the case, they would have left before the Sgelokultz had come, and Kino wouldn't have been involved in this fight.]

[It was incredible. I and my comrades were saved because this motorrad slept late!]

[When I told them I would like to give them a medal at least, Hermes insisted to stay like a spoiled child, but was only ignored by Kino.]

[And instead of a medal, Kino asked for a few things.]

[Fuel and food. Fortunately, we have plenty. I answered they could help themselves to as much as the motorrad could carry. I hope that was more than enough for all that trouble.]

[Kino deftly transferred gasoline from the trucks and obtained food.]

[Kino and Hermes said their goodbyes.]

[I thanked them one last time, and operated the device that shut the gates. Beyond the closing gates, watched as Kino's back became smaller.]

[And I thought, I'll probably never have the chance to meet Kino again for the rest of my life.]

[After that, I set my back on the walls, and waited for my allies while gazing at

the rising flames from the beacon. I was determined to stay awake, but before my allies arrived, I fell into a swoon, and had no memory of what came to pass.]

[When I regained consciousness, I was already in a bed surrounded by my comrades. That's where I am right now.]

[It was already evening.]

[The bullets from my shoulder and leg were extracted, and my hip was sewn. I was counted among the injured, and was given orders to rest. However, before I could explain everything that happened, my comrades congratulated me.]

[They were completely mistaken. They thought that I had single-handedly sniped at the nine cowards who attacked us, in defiance of the wounds that I have sustained.]

[I tried to tell them that they had it wrong. But I wasn't able to say it. I couldn't say it. That's because I was told soon after that our leader felt that this story could be put to good use.]

[To boost the morale of our troops, they spread around the news about me, the hero who thwarted the cowardly scheme of the Sgelokultz.]

[It's nothing more than a farce. But if it's for the sake of victory, I don't care. I'll play the part of a clown no matter how many times it takes. Besides, I won't be able to fight for over a month, and there's no guarantee that my left arm will be the same as before. This is the least I could do.]

[However, if there's anyone reading this, I want you to remember.]

[About the traveler called Kino and his motorrad Hermes.]

—

[That was everything that happened today.]

[I ended up writing it all at once. There might be lapses in my memory, but my account should be more or less accurate.]

[It's already midnight. As I passed out at noon, the remaining pain left me

unable to sleep. My right hand also feels rather tired.]

[From now on, the war with the Sgelokultz will continue. It will probably intensify even more. But we will not lose. And I will continue killing them.]

[I have lived twenty years.]

[And one out of those twenty years was spent in desperate struggle, in the killing of Sgelokultz day after day.]

[When this war is over, and when the Sgelokultz have been wiped out from this country, will my kin pass by twenty years of their lives without conflict? Will they spend their youth without killing or getting killed?]

[The answers to those questions will hinge on our battle from here on.]

---

[Oh I almost forgot. It's about Kino and the Sgelokultz.]

[When I first met him, I thought Kino and the Sgelokultz were the same. But I heard the story from Hermes. Kino is in fact, the same as us.]

[If Kino were born in this country, he would be one of us.]

[Perhaps, we would be fighting on the same side. And with that amazing skill, he would take down plenty of the Sgelokultz.]

[I am sure we would become great comrades-in-arms.]

[I just have a feeling it would have been like that.]

# “Land of Regulations” — Unreal Young Man

---

“Say... aren’t you that traveler Kino who arrived yesterday? I heard it from the radio!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I know standing around talking isn’t nice to look at, but please hear me out! It won’t take long. It’s about the injustice in this country.”

“Injustice?”

“Yes... Just last month, a law was passed in this country prohibiting xxxxx. This xxxxx was something we normally used to buy, but now it’s outlawed! Manufacture, sale, purchase, and even mere possession of it are no longer allowed! I was told to surrender all of my xxxxx, which I bought with the money I worked hard for. If I refused, I will be arrested!”

“It has become strict all of a sudden?”

“Yes! Isn’t it crazy? We wanted to let travelers know about this to spread it to other countries. If visitors come and say how ‘strange’ it is, then the foolish politicians of this country might change their minds! The chances may be slim, but we cling on it.”

“I see.”

“Politicians and activists claim that xxxxx will cause the destruction of humankind. That it ‘promotes misdeed’ and turns the youth unto evil, causing them to commit crimes! But xxxxx have been common here for decades, no, for centuries even! Did everyone turn evil after all that time? Or became criminals? In the first place, even if they banned xxxxx, crimes will not disappear!”

“Well that may be true.”

“Sure, maybe there are people who committed crimes upon being influenced by xxxxx. The possibility may not be zero, but if they prohibit it for that reason, then they might as well forbid everything in this world! And ignore those whose lives are being enhanced by xxxxx! At the end of the day, those who decided to outlaw xxxxx did so only because they did not like it! Just because they hated it, it matters not to them if it gets banned. They don’t care about the people who benefits from it!”

“Uh-huh.”

“They are being inconsiderate of the ones who use xxxxx sensibly! They don’t try to understand why we love or enjoy it. Instead, they convince themselves that we are despicable beings. If laws were made based on tastes just like that, then those based on human hobbies or preferences should not hold! Like those laws forbidding mustard because they were made by people who hate spicy foods. Or those laws banning the sale of honey simply because the legislator hated sweets!”

“Okay. I get your point.”

“Oh! Ah, I’m sorry for getting excited. I myself don’t want my country to be talked badly of. But please do spread the rumour about this foolish country that bans xxxxx in this day and age! I beg you!”

“Sure... but there’s just one thing I would like to ask.”

“Anything! What is it?”

“When I arrived here, I was not allowed to come in with my motorrad and persuaders. And so I had no choice but to go around the country on foot, and unarmed to boot. Now, what can you say about the laws that banned these things?”

“That’s very simple! Motorrads are nothing but loud and dangerous vehicles, and persuaders are murdering tools that no good citizen should be allowed to touch! Majority of the people, including me, absolutely hate them!”

# **“Land of Improved Luck” — The Fifth “C”, Cozenage —**

A lone car was riding through a vast land.

It was a tiny, yellow car so shabby, it was a marvel that it was still running in its condition.

On the driver seat at the right sat a slightly short but handsome young man, while on the passenger seat was a beautiful woman with long black hair. Both of them wore light-tinted sunglasses.

At the back seat of the car was their traveling luggage, arranged in a not-so-very orderly fashion.

Of note was a persuader (Note: a gun) powerful enough to kill an elephant casually mixed among the sleeping bags, tents, and cans of water and fuel.

The landscape featured the brown earth with grass and various trees growing on it, as well as hills.

It was an extensive area, with a row of low hills barring the view of the horizon. As it was spring, leaves grew in verdant abundance. The sky was clear, and the sun's rays were strong.

The snake-like winding stretch of the road was wide enough to let pass one truck.

Flanked left and right with bushes, the road was made of packed earth of a brownish hue with a tinge of red. It continued on without a single break. The tiny vehicle would shake each time it passed through one of the huge recesses scattered all over it.

“Are there people who go along this road, Master?” To avoid biting his tongue, the man on the driver’s seat waited for the jolts to settle down before

speaking.

The woman called Master answered without breaking her cool countenance.

“Who knows? I only heard that the country at the end of this road is not usually visited by people.”

“I’ll bet on it, with this kind of road. It’s great and all that it’s the dry season, but if it were raining, this place will be a swamp. —Since we went through all this trouble, it would be nice if we find some easy-money-scheme in there. What’s the specialty of that country?”

“Right. I heard they produce ceramics.”

The man grimaced at the woman’s response.

“That won’t do,” he answered as he gripped the steering wheel.

Because ceramics break easily, transporting them is a troublesome task. And unless they were masterpieces, they won’t fetch too high of a price. In other words their import and export is unpractical.

“Well, if there’s some delicious food there, I guess that will do,” Completely disheartened, the man answered as he gazed at the walls that could be seen just at the bottom of the hills.

The country the pair entered in was a very big one.

The walls run far and wide, the ends of which couldn’t be seen at all. A huge river leisurely flowed through the country, and the green fields was spread all over like square carpets.

The tiny car drove leisurely along the road and eventually reached the country’s center, the most prosperous part of the country. Even so, there were only rows of one-storey buildings made of bricks and wood; a vision of a truly peaceful town. Driving through the main street that was lined up with shops, made them stand out as outsiders. The modestly garbed citizens gathered around them almost simultaneously, carrying with them their baskets filled with vegetables and fruits.

The vegetables looked delicious on the virtue of their freshness, however, “Okay folks, please move aside. We’ll go shopping later.”

The man tried to chase away the crowd blocking their path with the car's horn, but being broken, it only coughed out a weak honk.

Eventually they found a place to stay in. They left the car, and came back to the road on foot.

They returned to the main street they traversed earlier, and the woman looked around in the shops. The man followed her while munching on some fruit.

The adults and children who seem to have time to spare followed behind them curiously.

They looked on with fascination at the shiny revolver on the woman's right thigh, as well as the automatic persuader hanging from the man's left waist. The children pointed their fingers to the pair as if they were shooting at them.

"If you guys do that with real persuaders, you would've been dead by now. Five times over," the man warned the children, but it didn't have much of an effect.

The woman peeked inside a few stores, but they only sell some food, ordinary goods, and clothes.

And when they visited the shops selling the rumored ceramics, they found, surely enough, high quality products lining up the shelves and shopkeepers enthusiastically offering their merchandise. However, the woman did not buy anything.

"Well, there are some really well-made ones," the man said while snapping his finger on a thin porcelain, creating a beautiful, high-pitched tune.

Just when they were about to finish going around the shops, all the time being surrounded by onlookers, a voice called out to the pair.

"Travelers, will you spare me your time? I have something I would like to discuss with you."

It was an old man, roughly around his eighties, with a middle-aged man waiting on him.

"What is it? If it's something that I can help with," the woman said, and the

old man guided the two to his own store.

It was a rather large store. The old man introduced himself as its shopkeeper. His wares were the same as the other shops — beautiful ceramics.

“Well, see here... Would you buy these?”

Two male workers carried a big wooden box at their feet. The box, which was big enough to be used as a desk, contained plenty of stones.

The stones were white and somewhat transparent. They were oval in shape, the smallest like the tip of a finger and the bigger ones as big as one's fist. It's not known as to how many hundreds or thousands of these stones clattered within the box.

“These are crystals, right?” the male traveler muttered.

The woman quietly crouched on the floor, stretched out her arm towards the box, and picked up a piece. It was oval in shape, milky white with a light pink tinge, not unlike a confetti candy.

“...”

The woman stared at the stone for about nine seconds, then nonchalantly returned it to the box. The stones lightly rattled against each other.

“Did you collect these within the country?”

The woman's question as soon as she stood up was answered by the old man.

“It is as you say. But these are of no use to us. To produce our ceramics, we collect fine mud grains from the river, but stones are left in our sieves in the process.”

The man nodded. “I see. I guess these must be getting in your way... but won't it be fine as long as you throw them away?”

“Well you see, if we throw them back into the river, the people who collect mud downstream will get angry. They'll get caught in the sieves again. We tried throwing them in the road, but the people walking barefoot came to complain that the stones hurt their feet. Obviously, we can't throw them in the fields, nor do we wish to pile them in an area that could be turned as a field in the future. It would be too troublesome to throw them outside the country. That's why we

collect them like this, and keep them. We have enough to fill a storehouse.”

“Oh... Then what about processing them into pretty accessories? That’s what they do in other countries.”

The old man only shook his head.

“We used to do that back when I was young, but eventually, everyone in this country learned how to do it. If they don’t sell, it would be a waste of time processing them. Right now, no one’s willing to do that, and no one wants them. That’s why we were hoping at least that you would buy these and take them with you outside the country.”

“I see. But I don’t think travelers or merchants would be interested in these. These won’t fetch a good price, at least in nearby countries,” the male traveler said with all honesty, and the old man’s shoulder dropped.

“So it’s just as we feared... What should we do...?”

And then, the female traveler who had been quiet for a while began to speak, her expression the same as ever,

“I have an idea.”

---

The woman talked indifferently, while being basked in the attention of the male traveler, the workers, and the old man.

“The reason why no one wants these stones is because they do not have any value.”

“Well, that’s true,” the male traveler interjected.

The woman continued. “If that’s the case, then all we need to do is to make it valuable.”

“To make it... valuable?” The old man cocked his head.

“Yes. Make this stone not just an ‘ordinary’ stone, but one that has the power

to ‘improve luck’. If you say that this has been an age-old tradition in this country, they will get sold.”

“...”

The woman continued, ignoring the flabbergasted expressions on the faces of the people around her.

“It goes without saying that the cooperation of everyone in this country is needed. If it sells, you can give the proceeds to the government, and that would be the end of the problem.”

“B-but...,” the old man interrupted. “Won’t that be... deceiving the customers? It’s like selling a teacup with a hole. This stone has no such powers at all...”

“Indeed it doesn’t have such powers. But it has the ability to make someone ‘believe’. If the person who bought it thinks, ‘I got something great! With this, my luck from now on will turn around!’ it will affect his self-confidence. A confident person’s actions often result in success, which will then be attributed to his ‘improved luck’. There are cases when a patient’s illness gets cured just by taking a sugar pill he believes to be an effective medicine. It may have been a lie, but the patient was cured for real. To put it in another way, whether a person is deceived or not depends on the person’s way of thinking.”

“...”

“Besides, there will be people who wouldn’t buy it, thinking, ‘You expect me to believe that!’. But as there will be people who would think, ‘I want to try it!’ there will be no problem. There’s no need for you to be guilty about deceiving anyone.”

“...”

“And when you sell it, you should make the price as high as possible. If it’s cheap, they will think that it’s not really that effective. On the other hand, if it’s really expensive, they will think that the demand for it is high, precisely because the stone must be effective. The trick is to sell little by little, in high prices.”

“...”

"Also, this stone is good enough as it is. You don't have to polish or change its shape. You can just tell them that it is more powerful the more its natural look is preserved. That way, you can avoid labor and processing expenses. Moreover, you'd best keep it a secret that there are these many. You should tell them that this stone is rare even in this country. Even if there's someone who would like to buy a lot at once, you should tell them that at the time, you only have a few pieces. That will add to the reasons why it is so expensive."

"A-ah..." The old man moaned. The other employees also made faces out of either admiration or shock, or probably both.

The female traveler went on. "But of course, whether you go through with this plan is still up to you to decide."

"Ah... You have certainly made your point. First of all, I would like to thank you. I would like to show you my appreciation, but I don't know how," the old man said.

To this, the woman only said, "Then as a remembrance, let me keep one stone."

And she took a single stone from the box. It was not too big, just the size of a coin.

"Will that be enough?"

The woman nodded. Then she added, "I have no aversion to ordinary stones. —I'll keep it to remember this country by."

— —

The two travelers spent one night in the country and departed the next day.

In the end, all they bought was their own food. Other than dried meat, they bought fresh food just enough to be finished in several days.

Once more, the run-down vehicle traversed the rough road. It was one tough item.

"There wasn't anything we could profit from after all," the man said as he drove.

"On the contrary. It was a very fruitful visit," the woman in the passenger seat replied.

The man looked dubiously beside him. "You mean that stone?"

He noticed the object that the woman fished out of her jacket's inner pocket. It was the stone from before, wrapped carefully in a cloth.

The man returned his gaze forward and spoke while moving the steering wheel.

"I wonder if they will do what you told them?"

"That honest old man won't, but the rest will probably give it a try."

"I see. Then I shall pray that the next traveler of merchant is someone who sincerely believes in luck," the man said, expecting the conversation to end.

However, the woman continued.

"You're just as clueless as those people, aren't you?"

"Huh? —About what?" The man asked in surprise.

The woman held out her right hand, and let the stone be shined upon by the rays of the sun filtering through the front glass. And then,

"This here is a raw diamond."

".... Eh? Master... what did you just say?"

"I said, this, and all those other stones in the box, are all diamonds. I couldn't even imagine how many carats there are. We're probably dealing with kilograms now."

"..."

The man mutely drove the car for a while, and then asked,

"We're not going back?"

"We're not going back."

The woman answered without delay.

The man's lips formed a word of disbelief.

"You could have told me..."

"It's your fault for not noticing. Because there were a lot, you went and concluded that they were mere crystals, right? Learned your lesson?"

"So harsh... But knowing that, why didn't you get more? Like a bagful or something?"

"This is more than enough for the work that I have done. If this stone gets processed into a gemstone and sold in a big country, the proceeds will be enough to cover several years of traveling expenses."

"T-then, if we took that whole box...?"

The man's breathing became rough.

In contrast, the woman remained as calm as ever.

"I would like to hear your opinion on that."

"Well, if we have so much raw diamonds with us, won't we be able to sell them for a really high price?" The man considered, but eventually shook his head. "No.... They will strike a hard bargain. Moreover, they will do everything to find out which country we got them from. We might even get killed in the end."

"That's why one's enough. We should also make up a story that we found it in some nameless riverside while we're traveling."

"I see... Ah, I got it...", the man said groaningly.

The woman remained silent and waited for the continuation of his words.

"If the next merchants or travelers that will come to that country does not notice that those stones are diamonds, they will not buy them, thinking that it was just some fake 'lucky charm'... Of course, there will be among them generous ones who would buy the stones in large quantities out of superstition, or those who really believe that the stones have power."

"That's right."

"But those who have sharp eyes like you will notice that they are diamonds

and buy as much as is viable, and will sell them somewhere else while keeping the source a secret. And will repeat it again. As a consequence, the people from that country will benefit, while the merchant or traveler will gain an even bigger profit. Moreover, they will avoid being bargained down on a large quantity of stones. It's also a protection against malicious people who may come to that country blinded by the diamonds."

"Exactly. —Of course, there is also a possibility that a person who couldn't read the circumstances will reveal everything."

"I wonder what will happen," the man murmured as he imagined the country's future and looked at the sky. And then,

"Even so—" The man said with an amused laugh. "If those men who pay for diamonds at incredibly high prices to offer to their lovers or fiancées find out, they'll faint in agony."

To these words, the woman only replied remorselessly,

"It's all good as long as they don't find out."

# “Land of Posthumous Works” — Write or Die

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It was a fine day, at a beautiful lake in a certain country.

As Kino and Hermes noisily traversed the road on the lakeside, they found a man fishing by its shore.

Under the morning sun, the man sat on an upturned bucket at the middle of the road, carrying a long fishing rod in his hands.

The thread tied at the end of the rod hang perfectly straight down, not towards the lake, but to a shallow puddle of water on the road created by the previous day's rain. The buoy was floating on it.

As the puddle was rather shallow, the thread beneath the float has coiled itself messily. Even the earthworm attached to the fish hook could be seen.

Kino stopped Hermes and put down his stand so that he would not collapse.

Then she addressed the man who did not pay them any mind.

“You’re this country’s best-selling author, right?”

“...”

The man turned to Kino for the first time, and asked her how she knew.

Kino answered.

“Because I was asked to kill you.”

A persuader (Note: A gun) glittered black on Kino’s hip.

---

The day before.

It was the second day since Kino and Hermes entered the country.

A group of men in business suits made their way towards Kino, who has just finished stuffing herself for lunch.

They entreated for her attention, as there was a matter they needed her assistance with.

“Okay, but I’m not yet sure if I will accept it,” Kino said, after which she and Hermes were guided into an exquisite building.

Within it were a number of old men with serious expressions.

They told Kino that there is someone they want killed.

“That must be a top-notch joke in this country, Kino. You’ve got to laugh,” Hermes said, but the men remained serious and began their impassive explanation.

‘Please kill this man.’

Needless to say, murder is illegal. However, the police cannot pursue a criminal beyond the country’s walls.

If on the next day, she leaves right after killing the man, there won’t be any problem. She will also be rewarded generously.

The person they wanted to have eliminated is the author of a best-selling novel in the country.

The series he wrote became incredibly popular, and sold tremendously all over the country. His work has been adapted into stage plays, films, TV dramas, comics, and is well-loved all over the country even to this day. It was the country’s most recent hit.

“Oh I get it! You guys are from the rival publishing company, aren’t you?” Hermes said at this point, but the men shook their heads, their faces still as serious as before.

Then they introduced themselves as the company holding rights to the best-

selling author's works.

"What? Why do you want to kill your garden moose?" Hermes remarked.

"...?"

Everyone fell silent.

"... You mean 'golden goose'?"

"Yes that's it!" Hermes said and went quiet for a while before correcting himself and asking the dumbfounded men once more, "Okay, like I said, why do you want to kill your golden goose?"

The question was answered by the most important-looking man among the group.

"Because he's no longer laying eggs."

Kino asked for an explanation.

The man was most certainly a brilliant author. His works become popular among the people. He wrote at an amazing speed. In just a short time, he finished writing the novels in his series one after another.

But recently, he has stopped writing, and has refused to write the continuation of his novel.

No matter how many times he was rushed by his editor, requested by the company's president—even if he was pampered or scolded—the author refused to write the sequel.

The fans were already demanding for the release date of the next book.

He refused, even though he knew very well that the timing was perfect for a new book—just when the film and drama are currently airing.

It's like letting a big opportunity escape before their very eyes. Even if the previously published books were still selling, if a new book doesn't come out, the sales will eventually taper off.

"But if you kill him—"

'You will have lost both the interest and the principal.' Hermes was about to say, but Kino interrupted.

"I see... It's really more advantageous for the publisher if he dies."

"What do you mean, Kino?"

Kino explained in place of the men, who only agreed in silence.

"Say, Hermes. If a best-selling author dies, it will be big news all over the country."

"Well, I guess so."

"And when that happens, his works will suddenly receive attention."

"I see! Even those who haven't taken notice before will gather around a shelf where something like 'In memory of author so-and-so's sudden death' is posted!"

"And so the published books will get sold. That's one reason. Another is, if an author dies, the series can be continued by someone else. Marketing it as a 'new work that inherits the plot and the author's dying wish' is enough for it to sell. Plus the movies and dramas can go on."

"I get it! That's really clever, Kino! Say, where have you learned such a mean trick?"

"I've seen it in a mystery novel I've read in one country. Though in that story, it was not an author, but a popular cartoonist."

"I see. So reading has its uses at times too."

"At times? Anyway, that's not important right now."

Kino turned to the men.

That Kino knew the reason made the explanation easier, so they went and reiterated the request.

'We'll pay you well, so please accept this job.'

And Kino told them her answer.

"In short, I refused the assassination request for you, and now I'm on my way out of this country," Kino told the man.

The man remained unfazed even after hearing the story.

"Hm, so when you refused, what did the publisher say? Wait, it must be something like this: 'Why won't you do it?! You have a persuader don't you? Since you have that, you must have killed people along the way, right? If you've killed a lot of people before, it shouldn't be too difficult for you to kill just one, right? What difference would it make if you killed one or two lazy authors? If you leave the country immediately, you won't be arrested! And in exchange, you'll be rewarded handsomely! This is a blessed opportunity for you! You can help a bunch of people, too! We're in trouble! Don't you care about our livelihood?! Huh?'"

The man quickly followed his question with a dialogue he made up on the spot, while enunciating it with a gruff voice.

"Clap, clap, clap!" Hermes applauded with words. Kino's eyes were also round in amazement.

"That's amazing. You almost nailed it."

"That's an author for you! —But what are you gonna do? Your life is in danger, you know?"

With his fishing rod still at hand, the man answered Hermes. "Hmm. Well I doubt there's anyone in the company who would go as far as throw away their lives to kill me, and since travelers rarely come to these parts, I think it will be all right." He was thoroughly relaxed.

He removed his glance from Kino and Hermes, and turned absentmindedly to the buoy in the puddle.

"How's it going? Caught any?" Kino asked.

This question took the man aback. Then he answered with a grin, "You're an odd one, traveler. There's no way you can catch a fish from a puddle!"

# “Land of Ruin” —Self-destruction—

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, fluffy fur. My face makes me look as if I'm always happy and smiling, but it doesn't mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Another fellow traveler is Ti, a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, and who has become part of the team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

---

We were running through a prairie.

The green buggy fully loaded with traveling luggage made its way through a green land.

The moist road of black earth continued endlessly in a perfectly straight line, passing through a number of grassy hills.

The weather was perfect, a typical warm day. The entirety of the sky was blue, and the spring sun in the east warmed up the fresh and green buds.

Master Shizu sat in the driver's seat in his usual sweater, with goggles on his face to protect his eyes from the wind.

Meanwhile, Ti wore her long-sleeved shirt and short pants, seated in her usual spot at the passenger seat.

And I was seated between Ti's legs, serving as a support for Ti's upper body. It's like this all the time, but the truth is, she's quite heavy.

We spotted trees on the prairie.

In one open area, tall conifer trees grew thickly, and made their own forest just in that place. This shade of green increased on both sides of the road.

"Ti, can you see those forests? Those are definitely planted by someone," Master Shizu began to explain to Ti.

He would look at Ti's face from time to time while speaking in the gentle tone of a classroom teacher, "If it were a natural forest, it's not possible for that same kind of tree to grow all together in one place. It's called afforestation, with human hands creating a forest. They plant tree saplings, cut down those that are slow to develop, and raise them like that for many years to use them as lumber."

"..."

Ti was as quiet as ever, but she was always listening. As evidence of that, whenever Master Shizu would say something that he has explained some time ago, she would answer 'I know.'

And so Master Shizu continued to lecture as we traveled, even though Ti gave no reaction.

"Just by looking at that forest, we can learn various things. First, the fact that there's a country nearby—obviously because it was humans who made that forest. There are few places within walls where one can make a forest. That's why they do it outside the country. If the walls are too old, it's no simple task to just expand, you see."

"..."

Ti listened in silence.

Meanwhile, I asked Master Shizu. Because he and Ti are planning to settle down somewhere, there's no reason for Ti to learn things useful for traveling, nor is it necessary to teach her along the way, right?

It seems that Master Shizu only noticed the fact himself just now, and was

taken aback for a moment before awkwardly admitting it.

Nevertheless, Master Shizu continued his lecture.

Whenever there's a chance, he would share his knowledge to Ti. And he likes to teach everything that he could during the time they spend together. That's what Master Shizu always had in mind.

"There are many kinds of countries. But you can roughly classify it into two kinds. One, in which the people are happy. And the other, in which the people aren't happy."

"..."

"And this I would like you to remember. A country is something that its citizens create. But there are times when its leaders lead the country to a direction where its citizens would be unhappy. The power to reject that also comes from the citizens, who fight and risk their lives."

I was worried that the topic suddenly became complicated. But the girl who had her chin propped on my head replied with a tone of certainty.

"I understand."

She nodded. This surprised both me and Master Shizu. And the words that followed added to our surprise.

"A fight, is it? You can leave the explosions to me."

Ti said while reaching for the baggage behind the seat and pulling out her grenade launcher. It was a weapon Master Shizu received as remuneration from a previous job.

After that, Master Shizu began a long explanation as to why people should not immediately resort to bombs to solve every single problem. And he didn't stop until the stone walls came into view.

—

Just when the sun was at its zenith, that is, at mid-day, we arrived at a country.

The walls of the country were surrounded by a forest.

Within the forest that grew out of afforestation were the walls. Judging from its arc, it wasn't a particularly big country. It was probably only around the size of a big town.

But its walls were huge compared to that of other countries.

"Why this...? What's going on here...?"

While Master Shizu slowly drove the buggy, he voiced out his qualms.

And unsurprisingly so. Just ahead of the road, from the place designated for the gates, the walls were being demolished one after the other, and an entrance is being opened. We could only see cranes and laborers, and no soldiers could be seen nearby.

The thick walls are the most important part of a country's defense. And so, in any country, weakening the walls—even strong ones—is simply not done.

Normally, it is impossible for it to be demolished without guards nearby. Because they wouldn't be able to withstand attacks from bandits, let alone an invasion from an enemy country.

The only exceptions that come to mind would be when a country is expanding, or if there's not a single country nearby, or if they signed a peace treaty with a neighboring country.

But from the scenery we've run into, and the fact that we've exited a country only a few days ago, those are not possible options. There are many countries nearby, and as far as I could tell, it's unlikely that they get along with each other very well.

Indeed we've visited a country that only had fences for walls, but that was a rather isolated case. I suppose that country still exists to this day.

"..."

It was not Ti, but Master Shizu who fell silent.

Master Shizu must have abandoned all thought of becoming a citizen of this country. His own safety aside, a country that does not consider its own defense is not suitable for Ti's future.

That's why we could have gone around the country without entering it, but there's the problem of fuel and food to take care of. And one ironclad rule of travelers is to resupply whenever there's a place that allows you to do it.

"I've decided."

After deliberating for several seconds, Master Shizu spoke.

In the end, he decided to enter the country, finish shopping immediately, and leave as soon as possible. We can't afford to get involved in trouble inside the country.

We probably won't be leaving much memory in this country.

That was what I thought at that time.

— —

Upon approaching the gates, a smiling immigration officer came before us.

'Welcome to this far-off country of ours,' he said with an eager to please smile. It was an attitude of a person that would allow everyone to enter the country.

Master Shizu sought permission to enter for purpose of resupplying, and as we expected, we were allowed to go in without any objections.

He said that we could stay as long as we like as everybody would be pleased to have us, but Master Shizu refused. Then he asked what happened to the country's defense.

The immigration officer answered with a smile.

"Under the rule of our new leader, friendship and love are valued above all things. Because we believe in people, we will not be betrayed. —Traveler, if it were you, can you betray someone who believes in you?"

While driving the buggy inside the country, Master Shizu murmured the answer to question of the immigration officer, who was no longer around to hear it.

“If you’re starving, you’ll be able to eat even your friend. —Thinking that your neighbor will never starve just because you’re not hungry; that’s not the same as friendship or love.”

---

I could tell that we have entered the country, but ironically, the country was very beautiful.

Stone houses that have an air of history in them were lined up neatly and made a very beautiful townscape. The road was also paved with stones, and it was very easy to ride on.

Judging from the beautiful clothes that the people walking on the streets wore, they must be living quite the lavish lifestyle. The smiling faces that they turned to us travelers do not seem to have any hint of care in the world.

Their technology was also pretty advanced. The town was lined up with street lights, radios could be seen being sold, and small automobiles were running on the road.

Master Shizu finished shopping for the necessities of fuel and food. Then he exchanged the objects that we brought from other countries, stuff that seemed rare in this country.

Master Shizu quickly finished buying and selling, even though he was bathed in the attention of the citizens. The shopkeepers were bright, and many were kind.

But we don’t have any more business in this country. We have no reason to tarry for long. Without taking a break, we headed towards the opposite end of the walls.

“Ice cream,” Ti said while pointing at a small truck by the roadside.

Parked on it was a truck painted with colorful ice cream designs, with children happily waiting for their turn to buy large three-scoopfuls of ice cream.

"Well, I guess this much is fine.... It's also been a while since I've eaten some."

It's not possible to get ahold of ice cream during our travels. So even if we have to leave quickly, it wasn't bad to indulge a little. Master Shizu brought the buggy near the shoulder of the road.

He bought a tall cone of ice cream, and Ti and Master Shizu ate beside the buggy. It's delicious, said Master Shizu.

"..."

Ti was quiet, eating vigorously, as if taking part in a challenge to bear as much cold inside the mouth as possible. It was not a normal way of eating ice cream.

It happened when the two finished eating, just when we were about to leave.

---

"Are you travelers?"

A man asked brusquely.

Well you can tell just by looking at us, is what I would like to answer, but Master Shizu answered politely like always.

"That's right. We were about to leave, though."

The person who approached the buggy from behind was a man past his sixties. He was plump, and he wore dirty overalls.

He looked sullen, but Master Shizu's polite response seemed to break his expression.

"I see. That's great then. —Go as soon as you can. You'll be forced to leave soon anyway."

Then he passed by the side of the buggy to leave.

In reaction to the last words that he spat out, Master Shizu asked, "What do you think? —About the demolition of the walls."

"..."

The man stopped in his tracks. He slowly looked around— “What about you? What do you think, traveler?” —and answered the question with another question.

Master Shizu answered politely. “Since we’ve entered this place only a while ago, I don’t know the entire situation but, if I were to be blunt, it’s an absurd decision. Normally, such a thing is not possible.”

“Isn’t it? It’s only normal to think of it that way, and I myself think so.”

It was a strange attitude for someone from this country. So there were also people like him.

“Then, why was it permitted in this country?”

Master Shizu asked the question we were all itching to know the answer to. We couldn’t ask it before because we’ve met nothing but cheerful citizens. This man however, seemed different.

“You want to know why?”

As expected, the man answered.

“Because it was decided by the newly elected leader of this country. He said that we should ‘open up’ to increase our allies. And so we are to demolish all the walls, enabling anyone and everyone to come and visit us. All in order to create a country that is ‘loved by everyone.’”

Master Shizu looked around him and lowered his tone.

“That leader... Does he, by any chance, have the support of a foreign country?”

There are plenty of countries that outlaw the slander of its leaders. Asking such a thing was quite bold of Master Shizu, who was usually prudent. He probably wants to know so badly.

The man readily confirmed it.

“Certainly. Over at the west, there’s a big country that would grab the slightest opportunity to increase its territory. Be it receiving money, getting blackmailed or being deceived—as to which I don’t know, maybe all of the above—but it’s almost certain that the leader is a puppet of that country.”

“Then this country will eventually be taken over.”

“Yeah. As early as tomorrow, this country may be occupied by an army. Those who oppose shall be slaughtered, and the rest shall be made into slaves. It happens all the time.”

“Indeed it’s not an unusual strategy to make your opponent destroy itself. If I were that country’s leader, I would probably devise the same scheme.”

“Right. But no one in this country realizes that.”

“Then what about you?” Master Shizu asked. I was also wondering about that. Among the citizens oblivious to danger, why is this guy the only sane one? Or to put in a different way, why is he the only strange one?

“You must have an idea already, ‘traveler’.”

The man’s words were hinting at something. Master Shizu turned around, then nodded in agreement.

“You weren’t born in this country. —You immigrated.”

“That’s right. But this is my country now. But that will end soon too. Tomorrow, perhaps. You don’t have to die with us, so leave now.”

The man turned away.

“What are you going to do?”

It was Ti, who hasn’t spoken for a long time.

To this day, I still don’t have the slightest idea what triggers Ti to speak. If anyone knows, please tell me.

The man turned to us once more, and directed a dry smile towards Ti.

“This is my country you see. I have no intention to escape, young lady with the green eyes. But I don’t plan to just stand around and watch as they trampled on my country.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Master Shizu asked. The man faced Master Shizu and took several steps closer. Leaving a slight distance between them, he whispered,

“Once the foreign troops force their way in and dare claim this land as their

own, I shall show them my pride.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Hah. Even though I look like this, I’m actually a president of a company in charge of the water and sewerage system. So I was able to lay a trap.”

“A trap, you say. Like, rendering the water service unusable?” Master Shizu took a guess, but the man’s answer was much more extreme.

“How dull. Once they fix it, it’s the end. It’s only a matter of time.”

The man’s face took on an eerie smile as he answered, “I planted explosives all over the country’s drainage system. Drums packed to the brim with explosives used in construction work. I told everyone those were new equipment to control the flow of water. I checked only a while ago, and everything should be working perfectly.”

“...Then?”

“I have the sole switch that can make the whole country’s underground system explode. I’m sure you know what that means, traveler.”

“The explosion will leak above ground,” Master Shizu answered with certainty. I feel like he has given Ti more ideas.

“Indeed. This country will be turned inside out, and will become of no use to anybody.”

“Many will die.”

“Including me. But I have chosen to punch a hole in my own boat over watching my country be disgraced. I am the only one who can call off the explosion. I considered someone may have noticed and come to stop me, but like that leader, no one can stop me at this point. We’re the same. —Let’s end this talk. Have a nice trip.”

Obeying the man’s words, Master Shizu and Ti boarded the buggy together. Me as well.

As we overtook the walking man, Master Shizu spoke.

“Good luck.”

Saying nothing, the man waved his hand.

---

We passed through the opposite end of the walls, where the demolition has progressed faster, and safely exited the country. How ironic.

"That man couldn't leave his country, huh..." Master Shizu said dolefully.

A wanderer's attachment to his new-found home is not an ordinary one. It's not an unusual thing.

And Master Shizu, yet to find such a place, have reached this far.

What does he think about that man who chose to stay in his sinking boat? I don't know.

Meanwhile, Ti, who was embracing me and had her chin on my head, spoke, "Problems that can be resolved by bombs, should be resolved by bombs."

Another sudden, long utterance from her. That's quite a strange way of thinking.

While the buggy rode through the forest,

"..."

Master Shizu remained silent.

---

That afternoon, we encountered a group of merchants.

When the forests vanished, and when we have run through the prairie for a while, we saw a file of trucks heading for the road.

Two medium-sized trucks, the carriers of which were fully loaded with luggage that were tied up in strings and wrapped in cloth-like material.

As the buggy can handle rough land better, Master Shizu turned the steering wheel and got off the road. When we got near the truck running through the prairie,

"Hey there, traveler. Thank you for giving way. How about some tea?"

The man who sat in the passenger seat of the truck spoke up.

It is not rare for wayfarers to intermingle with each other to exchange information. And so Master Shizu stopped the buggy.

The merchants consisted of six men.

A group of robust men in their twenties or thirties, indisposed of letting go of their persuaders. Possession of items that can be traded means that there is constant threat of getting attacked. The degree of risk they carry is not the same kind as a traveler's.

The two parties both stopped their vehicles, and started to prepare their own tea.

When a stranger offers you tea, the chance that it is laced by poison is not zero. When it would be troublesome to confirm whether that is the case, tea parties are often done like this.

The men said that they came from a distant country. Then they asked about the country we just visited. They said they're planning to sell clothes there.

Without seeming suspicious, Master Shizu reflected for a while, then decided, "About that country... it would be best if you don't go there for now. Your lives will be in danger."

The men's faces paled. Naturally.

And then Master Shizu told them what he knew. Including what that man told us, though he concealed his status and appearance.

So he told them not only about the possibility that the country would be occupied soon, but also about the bombs that were set up underground.

"That's... unbelievable..."

Eventually the dumbfounded men turned to Master Shizu with grim faces.

"But we'll incur huge losses if we turn back after coming this far. We'll come up with some excuse and conduct our business by the walls."

Which just shows how determined they are to go to that country.

"Then... be very careful."

Master Shizu said.

---

We parted with the merchants and rode once more.

The sun has gone down a big deal. Before long, it will be time to search for a place where we could set camp. Though it doesn't make much difference when you're in a prairie.

Master Shizu spoke as he drove.

"Those merchants... are probably scouts from the other country. They probably came to confirm if the walls have been demolished."

It's not entirely conclusive, but it's likely true. There aren't many merchants who would insist on going after finding out that much.

I thought I should ask some more, "Do you think they have changed their minds when they learned about the bombs?"

"I wonder. After considering it, I decided to tell them everything. But once they find that man and kill him, it's the end."

But as to which one's better, neither I nor Master Shizu knew.

Is it better for that man to be killed, resulting in the country being readily subjugated, and its people living a life of oppression?

Or is it better if that man continues with his counterattack, and his country will not be occupied in exchange for killing many of his people in the explosion?

When Master Shizu and I fell silent, Ti spoke.

"How true?"

"Hm? What do you mean, Ti?"

"Did that man really plant bombs? Or was it just a lie he wants us to spread?"

"..."

"..."

Master Shizu and I became speechless.

Ti's words left us wordless, like how she usually is.

The buggy ran through the road for a while, with only the sound of the tire kicking the ground and the squeak of the buggy's frame audible.

The possibility that the man was lying didn't even cross our minds.

Indeed, the man showed us no evidence of his claim. We have not seen with our own eyes if there were really bombs installed underground.

Master Shizu and I believed his words of our own accord after seeing the state the walls were in.

Master Shizu began, "If that man's words were only a bluff... And if he told the story to a traveler, anticipating that it was either a spy, or someone like me who would leak the information outside the country, then..."

And I continued from where he left off, "We were used by that man, and became a part of the defense of that country."

Master Shizu nodded. "Yeah... But we can no longer find out if that's really the case..."

That's because we can no longer return, and once we've traveled far enough, we can no longer hear rumors about that country.

It left Master Shizu and me feeling terribly fuzzy.

—

And we'll continue to feel that way until we forget about that country.

Of the living beings aboard the buggy, Ti was the only one able to relax. With a slightly lively, almost happy tone, she said,

"There are also plenty of things that can't be solved, or not necessarily solved by bombs."

As if she has learned something.

"..."

With its wordless driver, the buggy continued running through the prairie.

# “Land of Marriage —Testament—

Kino spun the aim of her persuader (Note: a persuader is a gun, in this case a pistol) towards the head of a man a mere two meters away, and pulled the trigger without a moment's hesitation. The man has yet to notice Kino's presence.

Along with the dull spurt of ejected gas, a 6-mm plastic bullet flied out while the slide of the persuader made its round trip.

The round projectile covered the short distance in a second, made its way towards the man's goggles, and bounced off it.

“Wah!”

The man had only noticed the moment he was shot, and his upper body quivered as he cried out. Panic was written all over his face as he pointed his own persuader towards Kino. But at the same time,

“A hit! Shot acknowledged!”

A booming voice made an announcement.

“Understood...”

The man Kino shot lifted up both hands, persuader and all, then walked away.

—

Kino was inside a big building.

Its rectangular interior was fifty meters long and as much as thirty meters wide.

There wasn't a single window, and as the walls were entirely of a faded silver

color, it was hard to tell whether it was made of metal or glass. There were doors labelled with ‘Emergency Exit’ all over the place.

The ceiling five meters up was pure white and embedded with circular lights spaced equally from each other. The room’s lighting made it seem as if it was daytime.

The floor’s entire surface was covered with hard rubber to mute footsteps.

Not one furniture could be seen.

Instead, there were plenty of barricades; plastic walls around three meters wide and objects cushioned with drums dotted the place.

Kino stood in front of one of these walls.

She was in her usual white shirt and black vest. But instead of the belt and holster she normally used, she had on a nylon vest attached with different pouches. These contained magazines for the persuader she was using at the moment.

On her head was her favorite hat, but the protective goggles on her eyes were not the same kind she used when riding Hermes. Her face was also wrapped with a thick cloth for protection.

Also, the persuader she was using was neither ‘Canon’ nor ‘Woodsman’, but a non-lethal weapon that fires off plastic bullets at a low speed using the force of air ejected at a low pressure.

After she shot the man,

“The grip sure is big...”

Kino grunted while she tightened her right hand around the long grip of the persuader.

She added her left hand to her grip, and slowly walked as she synchronized her aim with her own gaze.

---

Meanwhile,

"He did it again! That makes eight!"

"This traveler is amazing."

"It's kind of expected, but still... his movements are at a completely different level!"

"At this rate, he'll set a new record!"

"But what are we going to do...? This is a traveler we're talking about, you know?"

Thirty or so men who were watching through a monitor each uttered their own impressions.

They were all wearing jerseys for easy movement, and had thick pads on their elbows and knees. There was one middle-aged man, while the rest were young men in their twenties.

The room they were in was like some sort of a secret base.

The spacious room was lined up with several rows of sofas. Ten huge monitors and two even bigger monitors were embedded in one wall, and can be easily viewed while one is seated in the sofas.

One of the giant monitors was showing Kino. The picture was very sharp, enabling the viewer to discern even a tiny flicker from the corner of the screen.

At present, the monitor showed Kino as she nimbly moved from one wall to another, persuader in hand. At times she would carefully stick her head up from a ducking position, surveying the situation up ahead.

The ten big monitors showed different angles of the room Kino was in.

And now, one of the monitors showed a door on the wall being opened, and another man who carried the same persuader as Kino emerged.

At the same time, the other giant monitor began to project the man's image from above. There was a pair of goggles on his face, and below it was a plastic protective mask. His expression cannot be seen.

"Now, how long will this guy last?" said one observer seated in the sofa.

"I wonder. It'd be nice if Kino doesn't get bored with this game, though," Hermes said in response. All luggage was removed from the top of his rear wheel, and he was propped on his center stand in the space between the sofas, which was only wide enough for a wheelchair.

"Hey guys! He got me! That guy's amazing!"

A voice was heard. Its tone was half frustration and half admiration.

It was from a person who just entered the room, the man who was just shot by Kino. He was wearing a jersey like the others, but he has removed his goggles and he was no longer holding a persuader.

"You were too slow."

"You don't have enough resolve."

"You were scared, weren't you?"

The men around him teased remorselessly.

"You're one to talk! You were shot too!" the man answered back.

"All right, whatever," another man said as he urged the others to look at the monitor.

Through the monitor, they watched as the distance between Kino and the man gradually shrunk. All of their eyes were focused on the screen.

The positions of the two were readily shown by the extensive overhead footage. Kino was near the center of the room, while her opponent was just around a long and narrow wall.

While concealing themselves behind the barricades, they would check their surroundings for any signs of the opponent before quickly relocating.

As the distance between the two became smaller, the one to notice his opponent first was the man.

Just before Kino was able to hide behind a wall, the man saw a glimpse of her leg. But as she quickly disappeared, and moreover, because the distance between them was still about ten meters, he did not shoot and chose to hide

for the meantime.

“Oh! The traveler was spotted first!”

“You think he’ll be done in this time?”

“Go! Get him!”

“Show him what this country’s men are capable of!”

The men got stirred up, including the eight men who just got beaten by Kino.

The man within the monitor circled around to get behind Kino.

Since Kino was supposedly right in front of him, he made a big turn to his right. Confident of the position of his opponent, he moved quickly and without any hesitation.

Meanwhile, Kino’s movements were as careful and as steady as ever.

The man continued to move until he spotted Kino again. He was only fifteen meters away from Kino, who was standing in front of a barricade with her back turned to him.

Keeping his aim, he slowly approached while avoiding the barricades on his way, prepared to fire at any moment.

“Great! Go for it!”

“Will he win?”

“Just like that!”

As the men seethed in excitement, Hermes murmured,

“It would’ve been better if he fired the moment he saw Kino.”

“We’re not using real persuaders here. The effective range is only ten meters, and if possible, you should shoot within five meters to be sure. The traveler’s doing the same thing, right?” One man said.

“I get that, but—”

While this conversation was going on, the man continued to approach Kino bit by bit.

“Getting too close will just get you in trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because from the start, Kino was trained against being approached by—”

As the distance fell to seven meters, the man hardened his resolve. He exposed himself from the barricade and dashed off from the rubber flooring. He pulled the trigger as he quickly closed the gap. Intense firing ensued.

The bullets came flying towards Kino’s shoulder and head, and went past her.

Kino reacted as soon as the man dashed towards her, and twisted her body the moment the man pulled the trigger. As she turned around, her body buckled to the left, and slumped onto the rubber floor from her left shoulder.

Sooner than the man—who couldn’t stop his advance—could lower his aim, Kino fired a single shot.

All of the rounds fired by the man missed, while the bullet Kino fired hit the man’s hand.

The men in the surveillance room were dumbfounded.

“Told you. You’d have a better chance if you escaped as quickly as possible,” Hermes said.

—

Just when Kino has beaten the twelfth man,

“Excuse me? Can’t we just stop already? I was beginning to think if it wouldn’t be too rude to get shot on purpose.”

And with these words from Kino, the contest ended.

—

“That was really impressive, Kino!”

The one and only middle-aged man from the place before spoke to Kino delightedly.

They were in the dining hall of a hotel. There were many tables lined up in the spacious room, but right now there were no other customers. Only Kino and the jersey-clad man, Hermes beside the table, as well as a waiter from a few paces away were there.

Outside the window the sky was cloudy, and rain was falling.

“Thanks... I guess,” replied Kino, who was now wearing a shirt and drinking tea. ‘Canon’ and ‘Woodsman’ in their respective belts and holsters were safely placed on top of Hermes’ carrier.

“Here’s a story of Kino’s relentless feasting on a free meal after her outstanding performance. ‘Now, let the pigging out begin! Keep the food coming—Ouch!”

Hermes’ playful banter was received with a kick on his tires, courtesy of Kino.

“The food will be here soon, so please eat as much as you want. So, what do you think about that combat game? I’m very eager to hear your honest feedback,” the man asked, and Kino answered.

“Well... I think it’s pretty fun if you think of it as practice for shooting persuaders. I was surprised with the splendid training facility. Those persuaders are also really well-made. And because it was very weak, the memories you’ll be left with wouldn’t be too painful.”

“M-hm. What else? What about the performance of our young ones?”

“Let me see...”

While Kino fibbed with her words, Hermes answered from below, “Don’t tell them the truth Kino. As thanks for lunch.”

“Um... Let’s just say they were very ‘earnest’.”

“Oh!” The man interjected happily, urging Kino to continue.

“They were focused on nothing else except for charging against their opponent, that is, me. I suppose it’s a nice thing to be forward and all, but as a result, their movements become crude, and they end up being impatient. On

the other hand, I constantly keep in mind that I may die if I get shot, so I also consider escaping if given the chance. You don't have to overdo things just for the sake of winning. And it's probably because I think along those lines that it was easy to sense the opponent."

"I see.... Well, well, I suppose they wouldn't be any match for a person with actual combat experience. I'll remember that for future reference," the man said as he nodded several times, his admiration clear to be seen.

Soon, the food was delivered to their table.

The meal consisted of fried chicken sautéed with onions and carrots in a sweet and spicy sauce, a salad of boiled vegetables, a round bun fresh from the oven, and squeezed orange juice.

After saying her thanks, Kino ate without hesitation.

After the meal, the man and Kino drank their tea.

While drinking her tea, Kino asked, "Now, the most important question of all... What was that combat game for?"

"Yeah, we didn't hear that part!" Hermes added.

The man who had his cup on his lips slightly twitched his eyebrows before putting down his cup.

"Er, how far did I get to explain?"

"Until the part where you said: 'all unmarried men between ages eighteen and thirty are to participate in this combat game.' That was last night."

"Ah, yes of course. And as soon as the rules of the game were explained, you've been at it since morning?"

Kino nodded. "That's right. But, I have no idea at all what everyone's trying to accomplish by playing that game. My hunch is that something is being tested based on their performance in that game."

"I see you've noticed that much...," the man said, once again in an impressed manner. And then, "Well that was actually a pre-wedding activity."

"A what?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Kino tilted her head while Hermes asked.

"A pre-wedding activity we fondly call the 'marrigames'. It allows our people to find their match."

"Um, where?" Hermes quickly commented, while Kino asked further, "You mean through that game? But how?"

"Before that, I have to explain certain things about our country. —This is a very peaceful and quiet place. The taxes are very high, but as it is strictly set aside as a social security fund, the lives of the people are stable, and there's almost no gap between the rich and the poor."

"It certainly looks like it."

"We could tell as soon as we entered."

Kino and Hermes answered.

"As long as our men and women work, they are guaranteed a comfortable life. However, for a country's continuous existence, its people should build families and produce children."

"Of course."

"Uh-huh."

"Then, how does one find a spouse? In the first place, what does one find attractive in a potential partner? How does it go in other countries? What is the most important factor women look for?"

The man quizzed them a little, and after thinking for a moment, Kino answered.

"'Financial stability,' I guess?"

"Correct. It's probably the same in most places. In a normal country, a person who does well enough to provide a comfortable life and ensure bringing up of children is more likely to find a spouse. However, in this country, the young men have almost no difference from each other in terms of economic strength. Everyone's on equal footing."

"It's like a dissing contest!" Hermes chirped in.

"Huh?" The man tilted his head.

"I'm sorry. It's perfectly okay for you to ignore some of the things Hermes says," Kino said without mercy. Then they continued while ignoring Hermes.

"You mean to say... that the women in this country find strength in this combat game as a condition for finding a husband?"

"Exactly. The entire combat game was recorded on video. And the total number of people a participant was able to defeat is also kept on record. The men then show these to their sweethearts. For example, during a match-making party."

"What's a match-making party?"

"To put it simply, it's an event that gathers men and women of marriageable age who are looking for partners."

"That's unnecessary information since you're not going to invite Ki— OUCH."

Kino kicked Hermes' tires.

"And so the women fall for the men who performed well in the combat games. Soon, the love that develops ends up in a wedding. This process takes only a while. That's because in this country, if a man doesn't get married until thirty or a woman until she's twenty-five..."

"If they don't?"

"If they don't?"

"Well those men and women are going to be in a bit, no, quite pitiful circumstances. Are you interested in finding out what kind of fate awaits singles in this country?" the man asked in turn. A ring glittered on the ring finger of his left hand.

"Not really."

Kino shook her head, and chose to ignore Hermes as he pestered them with 'I want to know!'

The man continued his explanation. "Because of that, everybody becomes so

desperate in finding a spouse... However, if a man gets terrible results in the combat game, the women will ignore him completely. Even if an extremely good-looking man won't be spared if he ranks low in the game. That's why the men begin the game as soon as they reach eighteen and earnestly devote their spare time to it. They train themselves in order to become stronger than their opponents."

"So that's why the men yesterday were so desperate. After the game, they bombarded me with questions, too."

"That can't be helped. Kino, if you were a guy you'd be in serious trouble too. Though I think most of them didn't notice— Ouch!"

After kicking Hermes for the third time, Kino asked the man,

"Now I understand what the game is for, but I'm still confused with the women's attitude towards it. What makes them think that excellent skills in that game will make a good husband?"

"That's a very good question. The answer is, 'because everybody thinks so.'"

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

"The women of this country think this way: 'Being good in this game is the mark of an ideal man, one who would make a fine husband.' It is being taught to that effect to students at the primary and secondary levels once their sex education begins. In magazines for women, the models always choose the guy who has excellent marriage skills. Even in television dramas, the leading men are all good in this game. In doing so, we have created a cultural trend that is instilled in our women. Moreover, the trend is preserved because the women who were taught this way propagate it to their friends and acquaintances."

"You mean..."

Hermes gleefully spoke in Kino's stead. "Their talent and skills for this combat game will be utterly useless once the wedding's over!"

The man nodded readily. "That's right. It's totally unnecessary. To begin with, almost no one continues to play the combat game after getting married. Skills in

indoor persuader battles aren't really needed inside a country, don't you think? Neither agility nor superior marksmanship are requisites for marriage."

"Indeed..."

"Well that's obvious."

Kino and Hermes agreed. Then Kino asked another vital question.

"Then... why was it chosen?"

"Who knows?" The man shrugged.

"..."

"It seems this trend was created around five years ago, but I don't really know the reason why this combat game was chosen. It's probably something decided on by the country's bigwigs. Before this, people who could remember the order of playing cards the fastest were popular. And before that, the ones who could chop a cucumber as finely as possible and in the least amount of time were highly regarded. And before that, people who could walk backwards the fastest..."

"..."

"Kino, it's a good thing you didn't come here during those times. —Mister, will a trend on excellent motorrad-riding skills come?"

"I wonder. But I wouldn't be surprised if it does."

"Then, what about naming the most number of characters, or drawing the best pictures of your favorite manga?"

"I'm sure those trends are also possible."

"So just about anything would work, huh...," Kino said.

"Yes. As long as the entire country comes to a consensus... The people only have to agree on a certain quality that makes for an ideal husband."

"Okay, then after the wedding, what happens to the couples?"

"Things would work well if it's meant to. Otherwise, it doesn't. While there are happy couples, for sure there are also unhappy ones."

"It has completely nothing to do with their talent in the games, right?"

"Certainly. That's a matter of affection and effort on the couple's part. And that's not something the government can help with. As for happiness in marriage, in the end—"

The man looked directly at Kino and declared,

"The thing that is always being tested is the strength of their bond with each other."

# **“Land of Parasites” — Cure —**

The season was summer. And in a certain mountainous region, was a road.

It was a highly elevated area. The steep mountain ridges with the snow left behind in the gorges from which the mountain streams once flowed overlooked a wide valley that was thinly blanketed with grass, which danced in harmony with the breeze together with its light reddish blooms.

The light blue sky was clear, without a single cloud in sight. A number of small predatory birds squawked their hearts out while they flew in a crescent moon formation. To avoid getting spotted by these birds, tiny squirrel-like creatures skittered from rock to rock for cover.

The wide road ran parallel with a river, whose abundant spring water gushed vigorously. This road of tightly packed earth drew a brown line amidst the green of the grass.

And on it ran a lone motorrad (note: a motorcycle; only to mean that it cannot fly). It had two boxes on both sides of its rear wheel, on top of which was travel luggage.

Its rider was young, around mid-teens. Her black hair was topped with a hat with flaps that covered the ears, and she wore a pair of silver-framed goggles that was already peeling off in places.

It was the middle of the summer, but the air was chilly. The rider was wearing a black jacket fastened on the waist with a wide belt, and a hand persuader (note: a persuader is a gun, in this case a pistol) hung in its holster from her right thigh. An automatic persuader was fixed at the back of her waist.

To avoid overexerting the motorrad, and to prevent fatigue on her own body, the rider drove the motorrad leisurely.

As she rode, the rider observed the snow thaw with water seemingly clean

enough to be drunk on the spot.

"When you are in a place where you can find plenty of clean and clear water —" the rider said. It has been quite a while since she has spoken.

"Yeah? What about it, Kino?" the motorrad asked with overt eagerness. The rider called Kino continued.

"Most of the time, it is difficult to get your hands on some firewood."

"Oh, I see," the motorrad replied. Indeed, the place they were currently navigating was too elevated for tall trees to grow in.

"On the contrary, dense forests are more likely than not to have murky water. Well, you can't be in two places at once, as they say, Hermes."

"Ah, in short, it's a llama!"

Kino mused for a while before answering, "... a 'dilemma'?"

"Yes, that's it!" So said the motorrad called Hermes, who then fell quiet. After a while, he went on. "But there are places where you can have both, right?"

"From time to time, yes. —Even in a mountainous region like this, we should eventually see the edge of a forest once we descend this river. It would be really wonderful if the water of the river remains clean until then. That's great news for us travelers."

"But it won't do if there are foxes nearby, right?"

"Yup, Echinococcus is scary."

"What's that?"

"It's a kind of parasite that foxes carry. According to Master, it can take up to ten years after the egg enters your body before the onset of the illness."

"Talk about being patient. Rather than the one infected, won't the parasite forget instead?"

"Maybe it has a sharp memory... Well, at least better than that of a certain someone who forgot what I just said last night, Hermes."

"What did you tell me last night?"

“To get up early.”

“If it’s just that, then it’s not a matter of forgetting. It’s just a question of having the ability to do it or not.”

“Is that right...? Then why don’t we try keeping you up the whole night next time. Say, I’ll have water dripping on your tank overnight, or something.”

“Lack of sleep is a menace to the smooth functioning of a motorrad’s engine. I do not recommend it.”

“Loss of morning hours is a menace to travelers and fishermen too, you know.”

“Kino, fishing isn’t your forte.”

Just when Kino and Hermes’ conversation began to steer into incoherent topics, they reached a valley with a wide bend. Their destination skidded into their view.

“Walls spotted!”

“Country spotted!”

Hermes and Kino excitedly called out together.

Just ahead of the bend were the huge walls.

The walls made of grey stones stacked together obstructed the valley like a dam. The river was being directed into the country through a hole. The road beside it continues towards the gates.

“You know, there’s a rumor that the citizens of that country do not catch any disease until they die. At least that’s what the merchants and travelers who have visited it before told me.”

“Eh! If that’s true then it’s amazing! I wonder what kind of medical technology they have. Or maybe they use some kind of sorcery?”

“We’re going to find out.”

And so Kino and Hermes approached the gates.

— —

The huge gates were shut tight.

And beside it stood a soldier holding a huge hatchet as his weapon.

Kino's request for a three-day-stay was readily approved. The heavy gates slowly opened towards both sides, and Kino passed through it while pushing Hermes along.

The country was within the valley. The walls stood over the slopes on both sides, and stretched parallel with the valley. All over the land was an expanse of fields, a winding green belt that descended along with the hill road.

It was a long and narrow realm, reminiscent of a serpent. And its end was seemingly nonexistent from where they stood.

Kino looked at the map they borrowed.

According to it, the river flowed at the center of the country, serving as the backbone of the farmlands that extend all across the land. It terminates into an enormous lake at the other side of the country.

This lake was the widest part of the valley, dammed up by the opposite end of the walls. The map indicated a town at the outskirts of the lake.

"Let's go. It seems like it would take us some time," Kino said, and set off once again.

The road going through the fields was paved. It has become much easier to drive on, so Kino speeded up. Overhead, a certain species of bird outsailed Kino and Hermes.

People doing farm work happily waved their hands at them, which Kino acknowledged by raising her left hand while she rode.

The people who toiled skilfully in the fields all wore clothes made of natural fiber. No machine aided their work; instead, small-built horses leisurely pulled the ploughs for them.

"Hmm, it looks like you won't be getting supplies and fuel here," Hermes

observed.

"I'm prepared for that possibility," Kino answered. "But... if their amazing medical technology is independent of scientific progress, what's the secret behind their health?"

"Maybe there's a medicinal plant here with incredible effects? And if you drink that Kino, you'll be healthy your whole life!"

"I'd like to have some if that kind of thing does exist. Then again... I might not choose to drink it."

"Well, it could be terribly expensive."

"If that's the case, it doesn't explain why every single person here is healthy."

"Oh, that's right. It's a mystery."

Kino and Hermes ran through the meandering valley, and the landscape eventually transformed from fields, to a grassland filled with animals with camel-like necks, and finally to a bush forest.

In this forest with bushes that were cultivated for firewood, the citizens were scattered all over, drawing water from the river. There were others who walked in a queue as they felled shrubs and gathered them in bundles behind their horses. They descended the valley just like Kino and Hermes.

They gave way to their guests with smiles, and Kino and Hermes proceeded ahead. They passed through several stone huts, and by the time the big lake and the town adjacent to it came into view, the sun has already gone down a great deal.

---

The town was made entirely of stone.

The houses were made of the same material as the road's pavement—stones stacked neatly in a geometric design that complemented the cobblestone pattern of the road.

Ahead was the mouth of the lake, filled with clean water to the brim. Eventually, it vanishes beyond the slopes of the descending valley. Along its shores were roads that lead towards the walls.

Kino and Hermes entered the town. There were several hundreds of people in it, everyone waiting for them with smiling faces.

When Kino alighted from Hermes, a fifty-year-old looking man stepped forward to greet them.

"Welcome traveler and motorrad. I am the oldest person in this country. As its representative, let me be your guide."

"Thank you very much. I am Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes."

As she thanked the guide, she glanced at the people. Everyone was indeed younger than he is, and there was not a single old person in sight.

"Just how did the news about us reach you?" Hermes asked.

"Thanks to this guy here."

The man pointed to a child. And on top of the child's thick hat was a bird.

---

Kino and Hermes were guided to a house that was to serve as their lodgings.

It was on a slightly elevated area at the outskirts of the village. It offered a spectacular view of their surroundings; the mosaic-patterned town and the lake that looked like a blue mirror was visible with one sweep of the eye.

Just like the others, the house was made of stone, and its entrance had a thick cloth in place of a door. Upon parting it on both sides, the kitchen combined with the living room greeted them as soon as they entered. It was spacious enough for Hermes to be brought in. Further inside was the bedroom.

The shelves, tables and the rest of the furniture were all crafted from stone. Even the beds were built of piled stones, with thick felt serving as its cover. There was a warm-looking blanket made of animal hide, an oil lamp, and a

water jug.

The citizens were very apologetic for not having any other lodgings for them, but Kino only politely thanked them.

Afterwards, Kino was invited for dinner. Together with the guide as well as a few adults who were the current leaders of the country, they surrounded a table under the evening sky, partaking of a simple dinner.

The lakeshore was made into an area akin to a park, with low stone chairs and tables lined up along it. On top of the clean fabric covering of the tables were stone plates, with kiln-baked bread and a pan-baked fish on them. Using a thin wooden stick, the meat was separated from the bones. The bones were collected, ground into fine powder and stuffed inside the bread.

After the meal, Kino asked about the country.

She was told that the country's forerunners were a seasonal nomadic tribe who decided to settle down in this land a long, long time ago.

They raised their grain and livestock during the short summer, and passed the extremely harsh winters in peace within their homes, subsisting on the food that they have kept in reserve. They have no such thing as a currency; work was apportioned among the people, and the produce was divided accordingly among them. They have lived this way for a long time without any change, and it was a quiet and peaceful country that finds no need for it.

And when Kino brought up the rumor about the citizens of the country being healthy until their deaths,

"Yes, you have heard right. The people of this country do not fall ill at all until they die," the guide answered. Kino asked if it's okay to learn about their secret.

"You've come at a perfect time. Tomorrow, we will show you everything."

The guide answered with a smile.

---

The next morning, Kino woke up at dawn.

The temperature was exceedingly low, no different from winter in the lowlands. While still wearing her jacket and puffing out white air, Kino went out of the house to do her exercises.

The town and the lake were enveloped with a thin morning fog. It was as if the valley was mantled with a light silk that shook with the gentle breeze.

And even in this weather, many of the citizens were already awake and moving around. Some were taking the animals to graze, some have assembled to gather firewood, and others joined with setting seine nets in the lakes.

After her light exercises, Kino returned to wake Hermes up.

“...”

But when she was about to tap his tank, she stopped and instead, muttered to herself.

“Well, it’s about time to learn about the secret...”

“Let’s go!” Hermes immediately answered.

Kino grumbled with a disappointed look on her face. “It would be really nice if you’re always like this.”

“Don’t be stingy. This is the secret to health and long life we’re talking about!”

“Yeah, yeah... Well, let’s go have them tell us their secret.”

Kino straddled Hermes, and descended the hill without starting his engine.

They were welcomed by the people as soon as they reached the park, and eventually the guide arrived. After greetings, Kino was invited to a meal, and had fish once more as breakfast. However, the portions were much bigger compared to dinner.

By the time the sun has risen, the meal was over. Among the crowd surrounding the table, the guide turned to Kino and Hermes.

“Now then, it’s time to show you the secret to our health!”

“Yay! We’ve been waiting!” Hermes cheered, stirring up laughter among the townsfolk.

The guide stood up straight, then stretched his arms towards the blue sky, and spoke merrily.

"The secret to our lifelong health is the parasite dwelling inside our bodies! And today—I am to die!"

— —

"..."

"What did he say?"

Kino was tongue-tied, while Hermes asked.

"Now then, let me explain from the beginning."

The guide sat down with a thump.

Kino turned around and looked at the people, their expressions not changing the least bit, only watching attentively in amusement.

"..."

Kino then returned her gaze to the guide, who was, just like everybody else, smiling.

"... Please do."

"Good. There are several reasons why our ancestors decided to live here. There was plenty of water, it was rich in stones, and crops can be grown in the land. But first and foremost, it was because they found a parasite living in here."

"A parasite, you say... What kind?"

"It lives somewhere within our bodies, but no one really knows what kind of form it takes inside. It's not like we can open up someone just to find out."

"Of course..." Kino agreed. Meanwhile Hermes asked,

"Surely you can see it when it comes out?"

"True. But, we'll get to that later. —When our nomadic ancestors came upon this land one summer, half of them unknowingly got bitten by an insect. That's where everything started."

The guide continued, in a manner not unlike a speech.

"As winter came, our ancestors finally noticed—the difference between those who were stung by this insect and the rest of them. You see, it hardly comes as a surprise when people fall ill and die as a result of living in an environment as harsh as this. However, the people who got bitten obtained bodies that are invincible to disease."

"And then?"

"What happened?"

"Our ancestors thought, 'What if the bite of that insect was actually a good thing?'"

"I see..."

"Well, it's only natural to think so!"

"Obviously we don't have solid proof. So once summer arrived again, our ancestors searched for this insect. They found it near the nest of a wild animal. Afterwards, except for a few people who were still afraid of it, they deliberately got themselves bitten, and waited once more for winter to arrive."

"And what happened?"

"What became of them?"

"It was an even harsher winter. There was very little food, and everyone suffered in hunger. But when this winter has come to an end—"

"..."

"Gulp."

"Each and every one of those who were stung by the insect greeted spring without catching a single cold."

"I see..."

"Experiment done!"

"That was centuries ago. Our ancestors decided to settle on this land for eternity, and began to build a country. They carved stone and built walls, created a dam, and built houses. Then they cultivated the land for growing crops."

"And since then, everybody has enjoyed their lives in perfect health?"

"That's right. Nobody here died of disease. Rarely, there are some who would get wounded, or burnt. But even then, they would get well eventually without need for medicine."

"That's amazing..."

"Sounds like an easy life, eh."

"And just like that, time flowed by. Once a baby gets born, it will be bitten by the insect come summer. Because people who get sick disappeared, every single baby is brought up to adulthood. The mothers no longer have to give birth to plenty of children, like before. On the contrary, it has become necessary to control the number of births to avoid overpopulation. And this is now our country at present."

"I see... Now I understand that you are working with a mysterious force of nature," Kino said, and carried on,

"Then, what did you mean by 'I am to die'...?"

—

"It's just as I said. I am going to die today. That's because today is my fiftieth birthday."

"...?"

Kino tilted her head, and the man continued.

"When the host of the parasite turns fifty, it comes out of the body. And at that time, the host dies."

"So..."

"You mean up to now, every single one of you here died at the age of fifty?"

To Hermes' question, the man gave a firm nod, with an ever-present smile on his face.

"After they have decided to settle down, time passed by. After fifty years, the first batch of people who got stung by the insect died one after the other. They complained of hearing voices inside their head, and the morning of the next day..."

"..."

"Yes?"

While looking at Kino's eyes and listening to Hermes' voice, the man slowly stood up.

And then, in the midst of his people, he bellowed,

"Everyone, I thank you! It was a wonderful life! I was very happy!"

---

His voice echoed in the valley. The next thing they heard was the sound of the man's collapsing body.

"..."

The man vanished from Kino's sight. He vanished from in front of her as he dropped at the foot of table.

"Eh?"

At the same time as Hermes' reaction, the people approached the man's body, and several men carefully carried him up. Then they lay him down on the stone table right in front of Kino. With his palms facing upwards, they joined his hands together on top of his stomach.

Kino stood up and took a peek at the man's face.

"..."

The man was no longer breathing. His eyes were closed and the expression on his face was peaceful, as if he was only asleep.

A man in his thirties appeared before Kino, and spoke with a calm tone.

"My father has died. From here on, I shall take over in explaining."

---

This man looked much like the man who just died.

Only he looked like a younger version of the man.

"I get it! Mister, you're the son of this mister here! Well, you said it yourself, though!" Hermes exclaimed.

"Please go ahead."

"Yes. —Now then, please be seated. There's still some time."

As to what 'time' he was pertaining to, Kino had no idea. But Kino sat down as she was told, and the man also seated himself in front of her, with the dead man sandwiched between the two of them.

"Today my father turned exactly fifty. The moment he was born, he was bitten by the insect. He lived for fifty years, and now he has died. We understand everything. That's why I, my family, and all of our people do not feel grief over this."

"I see... So that's the effect of that parasite..."

"Yes. That insect allows a person to achieve perfect health. But after fifty years, the mature insect comes out, ending its host's life. Because the first ones who were bitten by this insect lived fifty years afterwards, we concluded that fifty years is the time it takes for this insect to reach maturity."

Hermes asked, "When your ancestors first realized that, what did they do?"

The man answered. "I believe they made a comparison."

"Comparison?"

"Yes. Between the harsh life they've lived until then and the stable life that has continued to this day."

"Oh I see. It must have been really difficult for them before that."

To make clear, Kino said, "In short, as a result of that comparison, after resigning themselves to the fate of living not a second longer than fifty years, they convinced the people, and everyone agreed to it..."

The man nodded.

"Exactly. There are plenty of ways to avoid the fate that this insect offers us, but we did not do any of them. —From then on, everyone here lived for exactly fifty years, then died. Right now I am thirty-five years old. I was born when my father was fifteen. And I have become a father at the age of fifteen as well. I have two children, and four grandchildren."

"So that's the secret to this country's 'lifelong health'..."

"Indeed. So now, what shall you do, Kino?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you so desire, you can live the next fifty years in perfect health."

"..."

"We have shared this secret to plenty of travelers. And some of them have accepted our offer."

"..."

"So, would you like to take it?"

Kino sent a firm gaze towards the man.

"I shall pass."

And answered thus.

"We understand."

"What about motorrads? I sure want to give it a try."

While laughing at Hermes' words, the man said,

"I regret to inform you... but we can't help you with that. The parasite can

only live inside living things.”

“Tsk! There’s plenty of space in my tank for it too!”

“Now then, Kino. We would like to show you something, so please move away a bit from father’s body,” the man said. Kino stood up and took several steps backward.

And in place, four girls who looked not much older than Kino approached the table, carrying babies in their arms.

They placed their sleeping children right beside the body of the dead man. They removed the infants from their swaddling and exposed the babies’ bellies.

And then the man approached his father’s corpse. With both hands, he carefully held up its chin and shifted it downwards. In short, he pulled the mouth wide open.

The people, as calm as ever, continued watching this spectacle. Kino looked at the people, then at the man, and then at the corpse.

Soon, the mouth of the corpse moved slowly. The opened lower jaw began to tremble little by little.

“...”

“...”

And right before the silent Kino and Hermes, a creature revealed itself from the corpse’s mouth.

Dripping with the dead man’s saliva, it was an insect of a light cream shade. It was roughly three centimeters in length. Among the insects Kino have seen in the past, the closest it resembled was a slug.

It crawled out from the corpse’s mouth with a slither.

The insect crept towards the upper lip, and climbed up the corpse’s nose. It stopped moving the moment it reached the highest point, then its back split into half.

In an instant, a crack raced through its body from tip to end, and from within appeared an insect of a different form. It could be called a bee, or a dragonfly,

or a butterfly. It slowly spread open its four wings.

Its transparent wings twinkled as it dried underneath the sun. When they joined up together, it took on a dark hue.

After tens of seconds.

The wings absorbed the sun's light, and glittered in a beautiful shade of emerald green.

The wings fluttered and produced a high-pitched buzz as it took to air. And with a sluggish movement, it floated just a little bit from the corpse and looked for a nearby landing spot.

The insect alighted on the belly of one of the babies placed around the corpse. There it pushed down the pointed end of its tail. After about three seconds, it floated once more, and headed towards the next baby.

"Is it laying eggs right now?" Hermes asked in a very soft voice.

"Yes. And it's all right to speak aloud. This insect does not pay mind to anyone except for the closest living thing around it. Then it lays its eggs."

The insect skipped the corpse, and went to the third baby, and eventually to the fourth baby. There too it laid its eggs, and spread its wings wide.

"Please look. —It's at its limit."

But its wings did not flap, and like a flag that has lost its wind, the insect collapsed without a sound.

One of the young mothers approached her child.

"I thank you. Your children are mine as well."

And with these words, she thanked the dead insect lying on top of her baby's stomach. Then she lightly picked up the insect and placed it on the palms of the dead man, which she gently closed. Finally, she fixed the swaddling of her baby and wrapped it in her embrace.

"It's over. This is everything—our country's practices, and what my father wished to show you. Last night, my father told me that he was very happy to have you witness his death today. It was nothing short of a miracle."

"We understand everything. Thank you very much." She first thanked the man in front of them,

"Thank you very much."

And then thanked the corpse, with its mouth still wide open.

Hermes asked, "I wonder what kind of insect that is? I've never seen anything like it before."

"We do not know. But what we do know is that it only exists in this valley, and that once it reaches maturity, it dies immediately after laying four eggs."

"So for fifty years, it stays inside the human body as a larva, then comes out and dies as soon as it lays its eggs."

"Yes. That's why this insect is—"

The man declared with a joyful smile.

"Without a doubt, a citizen of this country."

—

Kino and Hermes were also present in the man's funeral.

The citizens all took a glimpse at the dead man's face, and gently stroked his cheeks. None of them looked sad, or in tears.

Finally, Kino held her hat over her chest and offered a silent prayer. Afterwards, the body was placed inside a basket knit using materials from the bushes. This basket was carried by several men along the road beside the lake.

With Kino and Hermes following along, they proceeded to the deepest parts of the lake. Using stone weights, the corpse was submerged into the water.

"Underwater, a human becomes nutrition for the fish, which will in turn become food for us."

Said the man who shall bear the same fate after fifteen years.

— —

The morning of the next day, that is, the morning of the third day since they entered the country.

Kino and Hermes departed from the gates downstream the valley. Once they descended the zigzagging path, the road will once again lead to the bottom of the valley.

Kino stopped Hermes and turned around. She looked at the towering dam blocking the valley, the waterway beside it that allows the river to flow out of the country, and the waterfall that gushes from it.

After acknowledging the guards and the citizens waving their hands in farewell from the top of the dam, Kino launched off.

The river flowed alongside the road once more, heading to the bottom of the valley.

While riding comfortably, Hermes spoke,

“You ended up declining their offer, Kino. Even though it was completely free.”

“Because of the fifty-year limit.” Kino’s eyes narrowed slightly underneath her goggles. “I wonder if fifty years is too short...”

“Well, maybe. No, I’m sure it is,” Hermes said in complete agreement.

“If a lot of people finds out about this, what do you think would happen? — I’ve been thinking about that.”

“Hmm... I guess people who desire perfect health will come here in hoards?”

“If that happens, there may be a mad scramble for it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And those who obtain it—”

“Yeah?”

“Will probably have their lives targeted.”

Upon hearing Kino's answer, Hermes replied, "You bet! They'll probably be torn to pieces while still alive. Either way, we don't know if things will go well for them."

"Many people wish they have paid more attention to their health just before they die, after all."

"Like those people who take their health for granted and end up being seriously sick?"

"I wonder. They say those who experience grave illnesses take better care of their bodies and end up living longer, you know?"

"Then won't they regret it after all? Won't they think, 'I don't want to die tomorrow in exchange of having perfect health for fifty years! I wish I did not do it back then!'?"

Kino only responded to Hermes with a light shrug.

# Land of Discrimination — We Are NOT Like Us. —

Some day, some time.

Kino and Hermes had arrived at a country. And the moment they entered it, “You’re not a Zumtrattaran by any chance are you? For sure?”

They were pressed to answer this question by the immigration officer.

“Well, since I don’t have the slightest idea what a ‘zum-something’ is, I don’t think I am.”

And with this answer, Kino and Hermes were immediately given permission to enter.

---

The afternoon of the same day, Kino and Hermes decided to take a short break, “I highly doubt it, but just to make sure, you’re not a Zumtrattaran are you, traveler?”

They were asked sternly, this time by a woman peddling some ice cream. Kino denied it like before, and the woman became very relieved.

As Hermes couldn’t eat, he asked a question in place of Kino who was busy with her ice cream.

“Um, just what is this ‘Zumtrattaran’ that we keep hearing about?”

“They are the people living in a country up north—a filthy and disgusting bunch!” the woman declared, her tone becoming coarse.

While silently licking her raspberry ice cream, Kino concentrated on the conversation between Hermes and the woman.

"Oh. It seems those guys are pretty unpopular around here."

"Why of course... I refuse to consider those Zumtrattarans as fellow human beings. They're stingy, stinky, cowardly, and despite all of those they still got the nerve to be haughty! I wouldn't want to be put together with them."

"Heh, sure is something."

"Well, the point is, every one of us here hate them! You know, 'Zumtrattaran' means 'failure as human beings' in our old language."

"Oh, I see. Lady, have you met one of them before?"

"As luck may have it, I have never met them myself! And honestly, I would never want to meet one, ever. I'll probably end up looking away."

— —

After finishing her ice cream, Kino went astride Hermes and rode around the country.

And as they did, they heard more about the Zumtrattarans.

—

In one instance, a child who did not listen to his parents ran out to the road.

'If you do stupid things like that, you'll turn into a Zumtrattaran someday!'

'I'm sorry... I don't want to become a Zumtrattaran...'

—

And in another occasion, a worker who made a blunder in his work was scolded by his superior.

'See here, I don't want to work together with a Zumtrattaran? I'm sure you understand.'

'I'm terribly sorry! I'm not a Zumtrattaran! I'll definitely prove it!'

---

And in yet another incident,

'I wonder if you're one of those Zumtrattarans? My eyes are pretty bad, you see. Though, I would be glad if you're not.'

'N-no... I'm not a Zumtrattaran... That was really rude...'

---

And on another occasion, a man fell clumsily on his butt and was consequently told, 'Are you okay? You'll get laughed at by Zumtrattarans you know. Here take my hand.'

'Thanks. Ah, darned Zumtrattarans!"

---

"Kino, these 'Zumtrattarans' are famous here one way or the other. Everyone sure loves them!"

"I'm not so sure myself if you're actually wrong about that..."

Kino and Hermes have just finished sightseeing and had arrived at the hotel.

In the entrance hall,

*[Stray dogs and Zumtrattarans not allowed inside.]*

They saw a signboard with this message written on it.

---

Two days later,

Kino and Hermes have left the country.

While tracing the lone road heading north, they encountered a walking man, burdened with his traveling luggage.

"Yeah, that's my country. I'm on my way home now. Among our people, I'm about the only one who would dare go on traveling out of the country though."

Finding the perfect opportunity, Kino asked.

"Um, about the Zumtrattarans—"

"Oh, you're talking about the people mocked, loathed, and looked down on in our country, right?"

"Do you know anything about them?"

"Yeah. I was curious to know what kind of country it is, so I travelled north, and arrived there in no time. That country is..."

"Is what?" "How was it?"

Kino and Hermes asked, and the man immediately answered.

"It's a normal country. This country's customs are different from mine, but that's about it. All of those rumors were just lies."

"I see." "I see."

"But there is just one thing my home country has in common with them," the man grinned.

"And that is?" "And that is?"

"In that country's language, the word 'Bettaramnyuttan' stands for 'creatures lacking intellect'. And every day, they ridicule them as a way to watch their own behavior!"

# “A Righteous Land” — WAR = We Are Right!

---

A motorrad (note: a two-wheeled vehicle, only to mean that it doesn't fly) was parked on a road inside a thick forest.

Two black boxes were attached on both sides of its rear wheel, the carrier on top of which was piled with a suitcase and a sleeping bag. It was propped on its center stand, with its silver tank reflecting the greenery.

The motorrad was inside the forest which was in the midst of summer.

It was a region with a climate that wraps up and nearly erases all traces of green with snow once winter comes around. But now that it was summer, the trees competed in showing off bright hues of green at every opportunity. Insects flew about and the birds raised a clamor as they basked under the light of the noon sun streaming through the leaves.

The road was paved, its surface made of flat stones carefully pieced together with almost no gaps in between. It was wide enough for trucks to casually pass each other by.

Perhaps a result of regular repairs, even though it seemed to have seen quite a number of years, it had little bumps and hollows, and no weeds invading its tiny crevices. The road drew a perfectly straight gray line among the green of the leaves and branches.

“Not yet? Not yet?”

The motorrad muttered to itself with a tune. There was nobody around to answer.

A bird with light-green feathers perched on top of the motorrad's handle to rest its wings.

"Hey, my handle's no toilet, you hear?" The motorrad spoke to the bird, but received no reply.

After several moments, the bird flew away. Almost simultaneously, footsteps were heard from the forest, and soon the motorrad's owner emerged, bathed by the sunbeams that filtered through the trees.

It was a youth around mid-teens, wearing a white shirt and a black vest fastened at the hips with a wide belt. A hat topped her short black hair and silver-framed goggles dangled down her neck.

From her hip hung a holster containing a revolver-type persuader (note: a persuader is a gun; in this case, a pistol). Behind her hips, another one, this time a thin automatic, was mounted with its grip held up.

"Welcome back, Kino," the motorrad greeted.

"I'm back, Hermes," the rider called Kino crossed over to the pavement from the wooded area, and stood beside the motorrad she had just called by name.

Kino fished out a metallic flask from one of the boxes beside Hermes' rear wheel.

It was a canteen of crude workmanship, not unlike the type used by soldiers. It contained the water she boiled during the day, now completely tepid. She guzzled two mouthfuls of the liquid.

"So, found anything?" Hermes inquired.

"Nope, nothing."

Kino returned the canteen into the box as she answered.

She removed her hat and wiped the sweat off her face with the sleeves of her shirt.

"Is it really around here? The country we're looking for?" Hermes asked again.

"That's what I've heard... It was supposed to be in this basin."

Kino let her eyes wander as she replied. A poor view of the forest and no other manmade thing in sight except for the road, beyond which, only the ridge of a mountain vaguely visible from a distance.

"It's not like a country could just up and walk on its own..."

Kino tilted her head, and Hermes replied in agreement.

"And supposing it could move, or destroyed one way or another, there should at least be some walls or ruins left."

"True. —It's just that something's been bothering me."

"Oh? What is it?"

"This place we've been searching for... I've heard about it from countries quite a long way from here. And it's pretty old info too; the story probably has gone around for more than a century. Word was, there's a country in this basin with technology much more advanced compared to its neighbors."

"Okay, then?"

"But as we got closer to this region, all news about it vanished. Remember the country we just left? And the one before it? In both places, every soul, including the guards, claimed that they have never heard of any country like that around here."

"Hmm, that is strange."

"Sure is. And this road is just as odd. It connects with the neighboring countries, but..."

Kino looked down and lightly tapped the stones with her boots.

"Of course. A road as nice as this has no business lying around here if there's no country nearby," Hermes continued.

Kino looked up. "But this road winds way up to those mountains."

"So if we continue to go along this path, we'll soon be out of this basin, unless somewhere along the way we find some intersection. And that would be utterly unnecessary in the middle of the wild."

"Urgh..." Kino let out a tiny groan. "It's not entirely impossible that the info was wrong, but it just doesn't sit right with me. That's why I'm still searching."

"And now we're stuck looking for something so big. I wish people would leave things right where they should be."

"You can say that again. Just like you Hermes. You're exactly where I left you last night."

"Well it's the fruit of my arduous training."

"That's news to me."

"Well anyway, something you deliberately go looking for don't show up until it is found, Kino. Maybe we should stop? Then it might finally appear."

Kino showed Hermes a smile. "Maybe. —But, let's just go a bit further."

Kino went astride Hermes, booted the kick starter and brought the engine to life.

---

While they ran comfortably along the road, Kino directed her watchful gaze towards the scenery around her.

The loud roars of the engine accompanied them, yet the birds remained unperturbed and did not fly away. The colorful birds resting on a tree branch looked down at the passing motorrad and traveler.

"Quite a rich forest, huh," Hermes remarked.

"I wonder if I can eat that bird?" Kino muttered.

And after proceeding like this for a while,

"Halt! There's something to our right!"

To this Kino hit the brakes and turned her eyes to the right.

".... Where?"

There was only the green of trees, branches, and grass, and a red bird with a long tail flying across the landscape, which was not as glorious as the scenery they've been enjoying for a while.

"Look at the ground. It's not very obvious, but just a bit ahead, there's a dense hump, see?" Hermes said.

Kino focused her gaze, and indeed spotted the part with a slight, gently-sloping bulge. It was about as big as a car, and no trees grew at its top.

“Huh?”

“Get it? Let’s take a look.”

As they moved forward, Kino changed Hermes’ direction and made a little dash into the forested area towards the bulge. Then she alighted from Hermes, crouched and observed the ground.

“...”

Grass and earth, occasionally squirming insects, and nothing else.

“Dig it up a bit.”

“Okay.”

Complying with Hermes’ suggestion, Kino took out a small foldable shovel from the box.

She pierced the ground just where the bulge began, and started to dig.

“What will you do if you find gold, Kino?”

“I’ll take as much as I can load on you, Hermes.”

“Knew you’d say that.”

Kino toiled away, the warm and humid air in the forest causing her to sweat profusely. And as she lost count of how many times she wiped it off, the hole grew deeper.

And when Kino was knee-deep into the hole she was digging,

*Clang*

A dull clunk resounded as the shovel’s tip was repelled by something.

“Bingo! It’s the gold!”

Following Hermes’ delighted exclaim, Kino, with an equally joyful expression, dug hastily, shoved the earth out of the way, and brushed off the insects. And there she found— “.... Concrete.”

Kino said, dejection clear to be seen on her face. Before her, there was only dull gray concrete covered in dirt.

“Well that’s amazing. It’s exactly what I imagined it to be.”

Hermes said, not sounding the least bit disappointed. Kino asked in return, “Imagined? You got a guess what this is, Hermes?”

“Yep,” Hermes readily answered, and went on, “It’s a *tochka*, Kino.”

“By ‘*tochka*’... do you mean those used by armies for defense?”<sup>[2]</sup>

“Yeah. It’s sometimes called a ‘bunker’ or a ‘pillbox’. Usually shaped like an upturned bowl, it’s dug in a certain way to withstand enemy shelling, and is made of solid concrete to avoid getting blown away by a big bad wolf. It also has small loopholes from which the enemy could be fired at with persuaders or something.”

“An upturned bowl... I see. So one of those was completely buried here... But what do you mean by a big bad wolf?” Kino tilted her head as she asked, and Hermes gave her a short answer.

“It’s a fairy tale.”<sup>[3]</sup>

---

Kino and Hermes chatted in front of the *tochka*.

“So this means there must really be a country here.”

“Right. The info you got was correct Kino. There’s no need to make something like this if there’s no country. I’ve been seeing traces of similar structures for a while now. This area must have been used as a defensive line long ago.”

“Defense, huh... But whose side? Was it used to protect the country from outsiders? Or did outsiders use it to protect themselves from this country?”

“Who knows? If you unearth it completely, maybe we’d be able to tell from the direction the holes open. Wanna try?”

“I’ll pass. —We’re not here to conduct a research about a war. But,”

“But?”

“Let’s go deeper in. Maybe we’ll find something.”

“Roger.”

Kino launched Hermes off, and made their way into the forest in no particular

hurry.

She rode slowly over the damp earth, careful not to let Hermes' tires sink.

"This forest is also weird as can be," Hermes said.

"In what way?" asked Kino.

"It's a lush forest concentrated within a basin, see?"

"Now that you mention it."

"I have a feeling this forest was grown by people. When humans are involved, it is not uncommon to observe disparities in natural landscapes."

"People? Then perhaps there's really a country..."

"Maybe, maybe not. —But I've just seen something interesting. Look in front of you."

Kino strained her eyes to see, and up ahead beyond the gaps of the leaves and the branches, "Eh?"

She saw something so blue it was as if she was looking at the sky itself.

---

Kino and Hermes exited the forest, and came to a lakeshore.

"Wow..."

"Pretty, ain't it?"

There they stood before a pool of water, some tens of kilometers across.

Where the forest terminated abruptly, a short field of grass began and continued as it is to the edge of the lake, which spread soundlessly over the area, filled to the brim with water.

The lakeshore that stretched left and right traced beautiful arcs, describing an enormous circle. Where the arcs overlapped each other, in other words, at the opposite side of the shore far, far away, there was mist.

The water reflected the sky like a glass, and the ripples on its surface revealed the occasional wind's path. Nearby, a big fish leaped up and made a splash.

"How come a lake this big was not visible from the mountain pass...?"

Still atop Hermes, Kino expressed her mixed surprise and amazement.

"We entered from the back of the mountain ridge up north. Then we've been in the shadow of the forest the entire time."

"Well never mind that. This is such a beautiful scenery... Even if we don't find the country we've been aiming for, I'm already satisfied."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Why don't we camp out here tonight? There's fish, and I can spend the afternoon fishing."

"Would be nice if you can do it gracefully. —But first," Hermes dropped his tone.

"Hmm? First what?"

"Let's speak to that mister over there. To your left, please."

"!"

Kino turned her head in panic.

To the left side of the lakeshore, quite a distance away, a man stood in blank amazement.

---

The man looked around seventy.

Hermes called him 'mister', but it was actually an old man.

Nonetheless, the old man's back was straight and his posture was firm.

He wore over his thin body a light shirt topped with a multi-pocketed vest commonly used by those who go fishing. Instead of a hat, his head was wrapped with a bandana. A bag hung from his shoulder.

At first the man, who apparently had also arrived from the forest, observed Kino and Hermes with a befuddled look, but after a while he lifted his right arm and waved.

Kino waved back in return to show that she meant no harm.

The man disappeared into the forest, and soon came out, pulling by its reins a horse. The man nimbly mounted the fine black steed, and galloped along the shore towards Kino and Hermes.

Kino got off Hermes and propped him on his center stand.

The approaching man's horse was saddled with travel luggage, but it was not too enormous or loaded.

"If he's not hiding any more than that, he must have come from a country quite close by."

Kino nodded to Hermes' observation.

Handling the reins brightly, the man stopped the horse right in front of Kino and Hermes. Then he immediately jumped off the saddle, deftly for his age.

"Good day, traveler! Motorrad!"

The man spoke with an expression of combined surprise, delight, and excitement, accentuating even more the wrinkles that already stood out from his face.

Kino answered. "Hello. We weren't expecting we'd meet anyone in a place like this."

"Same here."

"That's not surprising! But, I'm glad! This is also the first time I've met a person here!"

Kino probed the ecstatic old man without a moments delay.

"We've come to these parts looking for a technologically-advanced country after hearing rumors about it. We pulled out of the road and entered the forest. Eventually we found this lake, but still there's no country to be seen anywhere."

The man's expression darkened, slowly and silently. "Is that so?"

Hermes went on, "If you know anything, please enlighten us."

"Oh, why would you think I know something?" the man asked with a grin.

"From the way you reacted just now," Hermes readily replied.

The man's eyes widened, and with a smile, he heaved a sigh.

"I'll tell you. But it's quite a long story. Why don't we take a seat?"

— —

There was a motorrad, a horse and two humans on the shores of a lake.

The horse chewed on some grass nearby, while the motorrad stood motionlessly on its center stand.

The humans sat on top of the grass, looking at the lake and holding their own cups of tea.

"Let's see... where should I start...?"

The man spoke, looking not at Kino, but at the lake. His eyes were narrowed, their dark brown pupils reflecting the lake that mirrored the sky.

Not having followed his words, Hermes chimed in.

"Gramps, are you an archaeologist?"

"No I'm not, do I look like one now...? Well anyway, you were right. There was a country like that around here."

"Uh-huh. And it used to be right here on this lake?"

"It was. Right on top of this lake..."

Listening to the exchange, Kino moved her gaze from the man to the lake. The wide, wide pool remained there as still as ever.

Hermes inquired further.

"And how many years ago was that?"

"Forty-two years ago."

The man's quick reply brought surprise to Kino's face.

"You sure know a lot."

"Well, sort of."

"Then, let's hear some more. What kind of country and how advanced was it?"

Hermes' questioning loosened the man's tongue.

"It stood out considerably in terms of technology. So much that it's incomparable to its neighbors. They developed their own technology, or otherwise improved on the knowledge brought to them from foreign countries." The man was only able to say this much before a cloud settled over his eyes. "Except... it was an outrageous country, a terrifying country..."

The man took a sip from his cup, and without saying any more about the country, asked Kino instead.

"Have you any idea what it is that countries with relatively advanced technology compared to their neighbors aim for? What it is they are inclined to do?"

After a few seconds, Kino answered, "They use their superior weapons to threaten or wage offensives against other countries, right?"

"Yeah. That's what they do all right. One boasts how strong they are and bother others about it."

The man nodded. Yes, that's right."

"So—," Kino began. "This very aggressive country attacked its neighbors with their powerful army? Is that it?"

The man answered. "No, that's not the case. The country that used to be in this place was extremely pacifist. And *that's* why they attacked their neighbors."

"What?" "Eh?"

Kino and Hermes answered together.

"You may not believe it, but everything I'm going to tell you is the truth," the man said.

---

"The country that used to stand here revered peace. Its people was set on the belief that peace takes precedence above all else—it was their country's guiding principle. Their citizens were thoroughly educated to regard war as an unconditionally evil deed. Their constitution prohibited war, and they vowed to never get involved in a war no matter what. They believed this, even though not a single one of them has ever experienced the horrors of war in the past."

"And then?" "After that...?"

"The country continued to live like that for centuries. In spite of their superior technology, they never diverted it to the development of weapons, or attacking other countries. In fact, they had good relations with their neighbors."

"Mm-hmm. So things were going great."

"The neighboring countries probably don't want to be attacked by such an advanced country in the first place."

"But forty-five years ago... an event completely changed the fate of that country. It was a very tiny spark, and at the time, no one probably considered it so remarkable to even call it an 'event'. But now that I speak of it, it was most certainly very important, a turning point in their history."

"Well that's how history usually is! At least for the ones involved."

"So what happened?"

"A song was written."

"Whaaat?"

"A song?"

"Yes a song. —Actually it was a poem first. After being given a melody, it turned into a hymn that exploded in popularity over the entire country."

"What kind of song was it?"

"It would save us time if you read the poem for yourselves. It's right here."

—

The man produced a steel plate from his bag.

About as big as a magazine, it consisted of not one, but several thin sheets of metal on top of each other, bound together by a ring through a little hole pierced in one of its corners.

"This plate was installed in every corner of the country's capital. The poem was carved over a number of metal sheets."

Though it was over forty-two years in age, it looked like something freshly dispatched from the factory, with its silver shining without speck or stain. The man handed it over to Kino.

"Thanks."

Kino took the plate and carried it before her face, where Hermes could also see it. Large, closely packed letters were carved beautifully and with stunning precision on the plate.

"Laser-engraved. As expected," Hermes commented.

Kino and Hermes read the letters.

First there was the title at the very top: "*The Song of Peace*".

And then it was followed by the lyrics.

#### *Verse I*

*We shall never condone war.*

*We do not acknowledge it, and never will.*

*This beautiful world has no need for war, or arms, or warriors.*

*Those who accept war, and refuse to lay down their arms for eternity,  
Those who tolerate it, disguised by the filthy name, 'necessary evil' —  
Are irrevocable fiends.*

*They slaughter their own kind, yet call themselves man.  
And claim, 'A battle for justice', 'A worthwhile sacrifice'.*

*There is no righteousness to be had in war.*

*There is no such thing as an indispensable fight.*

---

Kino finished reading the first sheet.

“Can I turn the page?” She asked Hermes.

“Sure go ahead.”

---

## *Verse II*

*All fighting is evil, all battles pointless.*

*Oh fools, haven’t you considered what you gain from shunning war?*

*Lives spared, and efforts well-spent—even a witless soul can tell as much.*

*Oh you who fashion weapons and you who merrily embrace them.*

*Do you not realize that nothing is borne of strife?*

*Or do you refuse to see the truth, as long as you alone are safe?*

*The girl whose arms were torn away by a bomb,*

*The boy who lost his legs to a landmine,*

*The thousands of infants turned into orphans.*

*Do you not hear their cries?*

*Or have you gone deaf to their laments, as long as you alone are safe?*

*War is inexcusable. It should never be allowed.*

*‘It may have been a tragedy, but it saved more lives.’ so they say.*

*Will those words reach the dead children, or comfort their grieving mothers?*

—

"Uh-huh. Quite a crude poem... the author did not even bother with rhymes," Hermes commented, and the man answered indifferently, "That's only natural. Its author has never written a poem in his entire life. It was composed at the spur of the moment, only out of boredom."

"..."

Still silent, Kino narrowed her eyes; Hermes paid no mind, and went on, "I see, I see. Kino, next sheet."

—

### *Verse III*

*Oh soldiers, the leaders who sent you in the frontlines, where are they?  
There, safe and sound, far from the battlefield that will be your grave.  
If wars were indeed worth undertaking, why is the first step forward not theirs?*

*Oh soldiers, with those persuaders, you kill someone else.  
But will you aim at your friend? Send a bullet to your father?  
Because those unsightly weapons in your hands,  
Exist to kill somebody's father, to murder somebody's friend.*

*Why don't you aim at the one who gave you the order,  
And ask, 'Why do I have to pull this trigger,'  
'When you, I, and they—are fellow human beings?'*

*All those who accept war are irrevocable fiends.  
And we who cherish peace, will only abide by this truth!*

—

"Um, is it going to continue with this kind of tone 'til the end?" Hermes asked vapidly.

"It's getting tiring, eh...?"

Kino glanced sideways at Hermes.

The man spoke. "Don't worry. The fourth sheet's up next. That's where the problem begins."

---

#### *Verse IV*

*So we lovers of peace are as one.  
To stomp on those who approve of war!  
To erase them from the face of the earth,  
And obliterate conflict in this world,  
So that peace may reign once more.*

*Hand in hand, we stand against them, we lovers of peace.  
Allured by a folly called war, immune to human reasoning;  
These excuse for humans, nay, beings more akin to beasts!*

*And so let us kill, and bring them destruction!  
They who uphold war, they who cause strife,  
Let us annihilate them, lovers of peace!*

*Come!*

---

"..."

"..."

Kino and Hermes fell mute for a good five seconds after they finished reading the sheet.

Then Kino spoke first, her tone glum.

"These guys... are pretty extreme, huh?"

"And quite frank too," Hermes added, amused.

Kino turned over another sheet.

—

### *Verse V*

*Come!*

*Kill the soldiers!*

*Kill their supporters!*

*Kill their admirers!*

*Kill their spawns who're fed by blood-stained hands!*

*For parent and offspring are murderers alike!*

*Kill all of them!*

*As long as they live,*

*This world will not be rid of war.*

*Gather them 'round, and burn them up!*

*And the world will emerge beautiful from their ashes.*

*A world without war, a world brimming with peace,*

*That ideal world will spread from beneath their corpses.*

—

"..."

Kino wordlessly turned the fifth sheet, and found herself staring at the first one.

"It's finished?"

"Yes," the man answered Hermes. And then,

"That's the song that became so popular in this country long ago. It was matched with a pleasant tune, and practically became the country's anthem. The citizens were crazy about it. They felt the song just put into words the country's wishes and the very reason for it and its people's existence."

"But isn't this— Never mind. There's no point arguing about it now, anyway!" Hermes said gleefully. Kino sighed as she returned the plate to the man.

"I understand what you mean. So— something terrible happened?"

The man nodded as he took back the plates.

"Yes, it was most dreadful indeed. Ushered by this song, the citizens of this country, the 'lovers of peace', became determined to slaughter the 'enemies of peace'. It was truly unfortunate that they had the drive to carry out their vision, and began to work towards it. An even bigger misfortune was that they were very much capable of doing so."

"Yes, the power of science! So, they were able to build an army in no time?"

"That's correct. Of course, since they hated armies, they did not call it an 'army'. At the time, they called themselves names like 'Peace Corps' or 'Dream Builders'."

"But in reality...?" Kino asked, and the man nodded once more.

"Yes. They were no different from any regular army. They used superior rapid-fire persuaders, and long-ranged cannons and tough tanks... And they trained hard for the sake of making their dream a reality."

"And then? What happened to this country?"

"I believe you've guessed already. —Yes, in high spirits, they headed out of the country to 'bring about world peace'. They marched to their nearest neighbor and aimed their cannons to its walls, demanding that they instantly disband their military forces. Of course in their minds, it was all 'for peace' and 'to avoid wars from bringing forth any more tragedy'."

"Who would interpret it that way?"

"Yes, of course their message didn't come across like that. The sudden threat threw their neighbor into panic, who quickly dispatched a messenger to another country to seek for assistance. But that messenger will have nowhere to return to."

Without showing any hint of emotion, the man continued to speak of the country's history.

"Having not responded to the demand within the time limit, that country was rained down on by concentrated fire. It didn't take the whole night to destroy it. Those who resisted, those who surrendered, even the injured ones and the women and the children, were all slaughtered. They were 'supporters of war' and 'harmful pests' that wouldn't be of any use alive. It mattered little whether they resisted or not."

"..."

"Oh dear."

"Believing that they had made the world a little bit more peaceful with the destruction of one country, they returned triumphantly to their home, and started to look for their next target. At this point, there was only one way for their neighboring countries to avoid getting annihilated by this stronger foe. Any guesses?"

"Yes. —To form an alliance and surround this country from all sides."

"Well, there's not much they can do other than that."

"Correct. These countries were by no means friendly with each other, and have even fought in the past for varied reasons. But they decided to join forces just for this occasion. And the approach they chose to solve the tight spot they were in was war. The peace-loving country was enraged. They could not comprehend why they should be attacked, when all they sought was peace. And concluding that their enemies were mere fools who wish to get in the way of achieving world peace, they resisted. They were overwhelmingly outnumbered by the allied countries, who surrounded them in this basin, but their weapons were far more superior."

"There must have been quite a show of firepower then."

"Yes. The allies fought desperately. And the number of casualties from their side was tenfold that of their opponent. If they lagged even a little in providing replacements and supplies, they would have lost."

"But we know that they won in the end, so the 'war-loving allies' must have had tricks up their sleeves," Hermes jested with a hint of sarcasm, which the man didn't seem to notice as he replied, "I'm sure you can imagine how desperate the allies must have been. The battle in this basin continued to intensify, the allies advancing at the speed of a turtle, digging trenches in the ground and enduring violent bombings."

"Then those tochkas buried in the forest should have been used that time. So they belonged to the allies."

When Kino said this, the man's eyes turned to dinner plates and expressed his awe.

"You saw those? Yes that's correct. The soldiers from this country wore reinforced armor that was developed during the war. It helped their movements, and could even repel bullets. Moreover, their weapons were large and powerful. The allies had no choice but to wait for the slightest opportunity to dig trenches. It turned out to be a test of endurance for them."

"How heroic. But all along, the people of this country believed that everything was for the sake of peace?"

"They probably did not doubt it for even a second. They believed that there couldn't be an act more supreme than to offer your life in pursuit of peace. They viewed the fatalities on their side as 'a necessary but priceless sacrifice', and regarded with utter hostility the soldiers of the allies, who were coming to murder their brethren."

"So, what happened in the end? Also—" Kino pointed at the lake before them. "How did it turn to this?"

With his gaze fixed on the lake, the man answered.

"In spite of themselves, the country eventually succumbed to the overwhelming number of their opponents. Their walls were surrounded and aimed at by cannons, and the allies offered them the option to surrender."

"Uh-huh."

"And then?"

"They refused. The reply from them was, 'Better be slaughtered, than surrender to inhuman savages who favored war! With our pride as human beings in our hearts, we shall never give up fighting for peace to our dying breaths!' They say the commander of the allies who received this reply wrote in his report: 'Every single person who heard this could not decide whether to laugh or to get angry.'" The man looked up at the sky and gazed at its blueness, which though identical with the lake's, was empty. He sucked in air, and continued, "There was nothing that can be done about it. After bombarding the interior of the country, they tore down the walls, rushed in, and killed everyone who resisted. That means they had to kill everyone. Every single person in that country, from the elderly to the women, not to mention children, took up arms and fought back, to defeat those who get in the way of world peace. The soldiers from the allies who had no choice but to kill children that were the same age as their own later suffered deep trauma from the experience. There were some who never recovered."

"Hmm. But they did solve their problem. The world didn't get any peaceful though!" The man nodded to Hermes' words without showing any signs of emotion.

"Indeed, what's settled is settled. Anyway, it still took two years. —There was one final thing they had to do."

"To seal away that country's technology?" Kino asked, and the man affirmed.

"But didn't they desire to gain that knowledge for themselves? The one who obtains it will become powerful. They could have at least claimed the spoils of war."

"If it were an ordinary war, that's probably what would have happened. The winning side would ask a large sum for reparations and would take the technology for themselves."

"What's the reason they did not do that?" Kino asked.

"Ironically, after having fought so hard, the countries came to abhor war.

They did not wish for another country to get their hands on this knowledge and have the tragedy repeat itself. So everyone relinquished their claims to it. It was a most reasonable decision. And finally, they decided to pretend that none of it happened—”

“By blowing up the country! Kaboom!”

“Yes. After cremating all of the bodies, they destroyed everything—the walls, the houses, the weapons, the blueprints. When everything was turned to rubble, they dug a deep hole and packed it with as much explosives as they could, and detonated them all. It took them one year to gather enough explosives for the task. The blast shook the ground and carved an enormous hole, wiping off this country from the map. The basin turned into a wasteland, and the allies then planted trees to hide all traces of what happened here. They laid out new roads so that no traveler would ever come upon the lake.”

“I see, I see. Now that solves all of the mysteries!”

“And it became taboo for the neighboring countries to mention a word about the country that once existed here? It’s no wonder everyone claimed they knew nothing about it.”

The man shrugged. “There’s no way they’re telling you. Everyone wanted to forget. Not a word was mentioned in their school’s history lessons. And they did not tell their children about it. The truth will be taken to the grave along with those who remembered it. All they wanted was to believe that it never happened. They didn’t want try and understand what led those people to do something so incomprehensible.”

“I see. With this, we finally learned everything about the mystery of this lake, and the mysterious country that was once on it. —All’s well that ends well.”

Hermes was about to end the story. However,

“I have one more question.”

Kino asked, looking straight into the man’s eyes.

“How come you know so much about all this?”

“...”

The man reciprocated Kino's gaze with his creased eyes.

"Why do you think? —I'm sure you already have an answer to that," he asked in return.

Kino answered.

"It's because you were from this country."

—

A powerful breeze made the leaves and branches in the forest rustle, then swept gently through the lake.

The man glared at Kino with an expression of amusement.

"Why do you think so?"

"I had to make a few assumptions," Kino began. "But first, it was because you talked about everything so conclusively. It didn't sound like you've only heard about it from someone else."

"Is that all?"

"No. —You also seem to know way too many details. I doubt the allies, or the first country to be destroyed, would have known about the song."

"Hm... But that evidence is still weak. Maybe you're only baiting me to tell you the answer?"

"There's that too."

"Honest, eh?" The man grinned.

"So what's the truth?" Hermes asked.

"That's correct. I was once part of the country that stood here. I know all about that song, and the plates were among the things I've brought with me when I left the country."

"Wow! Then isn't that amazing? You're the one and only survivor of this country!" Hermes exclaimed.

"I guess you can say that."

Kino nodded in satisfaction. “But I couldn’t imagine it. How you came to be the only one to break free from that country’s ‘thinking’, and how you managed to escape and survive in the end. You’re hiding a secret aren’t you?”

“Digging deep when it comes to talk of survival eh? As you’d expect from a traveler. Fine, I’ll tell you. At the height of the song’s popularity, I woke up from my frenzy. As a result, I became the ‘crazy’ one. I began to dread the idea of staying in that country, and wished to escape someday. When the allies surrounded the walls, I pretended to be out for reconnaissance, and surrendered.”

“Oh I see. So you were hidden and protected by the allies as an informant!”

“Yes. I sold my country. A traitor who deserted his country at the most critical time.”

The man’s words were self-deprecating, but his expression did not show any signs of it. Just like Hermes, who spoke out again with his usual tone, “That’s that. So were you the only one who did, or rather, *could* do that?”

“Yes, only me.”

“Why...?”

It was not a question for the man, but to herself as Kino muttered. She contemplated about it for a while, and for a long moment, there was only silence under the clear blue sky.

“Ah! It can’t be...”

Kino finally realized something, and raised her voice in surprise. The man’s expression was imperturbable as he wordlessly gazed at the blue lake.

“Kino what did you find out? Is this guy over here actually dead? Are we talking to a ghost?”

Ignoring Hermes’ inventive idea, Kino turned to the man.

“It was you? The one who wrote that poem?”

—

“That’s right.”

The man had affirmed, as he had plenty of times already.

I was the one who created this poem. Back when I was young and still lived in this country.”

“What a shock!” Hermes said, sounding genuinely surprised. “If I were a human, I’d have jumped high enough to reach the clouds!”

Hermes’ additional comment got no reaction from the two humans.

After a few seconds, Hermes asked, “Er, so why? How did you, the originator of all this, escaped?”

“Exactly because I was the originator.”

“Back when you wrote the poem— you believed it too, didn’t you?” Kino asked.

“Yes. I sincerely felt that way. Ever since I was a child, the idea that wars are absolutely evil had been drilled into my head. Wars should never be given the slightest nod. Why? Because it shouldn’t be, and that’s that. It was the kind of education that did not allow you to question or think about things. Education is a truly fearsome thing. If need be, you can use it to convince everyone that white is black, and black is white.”

“Yes. I know how difficult it is to go against that,” Kino said, seeing someone else’s face in her mind’s eye. Someone not there.

“My... You seem to have recollections of your own. Well, I won’t press you about those,” the man said, looking at Kino.

“So mister, what happened to you?” Hermes urged on.

“Like I said, I truly believed it. They were wrong—the people from countries that do not condemn war, and continue to preserve their armies. I deemed them as psychos, madmen who only bring destruction to their fellow men. I can’t be wrong about them.—One day, I made a slight mistake at work. On impulse, I vented my anger on those fools who could not let go of war. That poem contained my honest thoughts, which I only scribbled down during a time when I was brimming with emotions. I remember that evening very clearly. The moon shined so beautifully that night.”

"And then?" "What happened next?"

"The next day, I sent the little piece I wrote to a government-run newspaper. Since I've gone and took the trouble to write it down, why not have it acknowledged, even if it's only in the reader's corner of the newspaper? It would certainly make me happy, and I can boast to my friends about it. At least that how I felt at the time."

The man spoke indifferently, his emotions still indiscernible.

"The next day, I was surrounded by journalists. And not long after that, I was hailed as a genius poet— Honestly, I felt proud and elated back then. The poem became a song in no time, and thrived all over the country. This plate was installed in every corner, and with each passing day, the people became more and more passionate, and united in spirit. But in the middle of this craze, I gradually calmed down, and regained my senses bit by bit. As to what point and what caused it to happen, I no longer know."

The man gently shook his head.

"But soon... I harbored a desire to detach myself from the people whose hearts I have stirred. It's not that I changed my principles and now consider war to be something necessary, and I still felt there are merits to subjugating countries that commit war... But I was tormented by an unexplainable chill, and time passed without me being able to bring myself to share these thoughts to anyone. And in the end, it's just as I told you before... I became the 'crazy' one. But I hid it as best as I could, and determined not to stay any longer, I escaped from my country. —That is all I have to say."

"I see.... Thank you for telling us everything."

Kino politely thanked the man, but he only shook his hands and claimed that there was nothing she should thank him for.

"Hey, you said you became 'crazy', but why didn't you consider to promote change from within? Since you're the one who wrote the song, don't you have at least the right to speak out your mind?" Hermes asked without holding back.

"Let' see. If I disagreed with what the country was doing, my status as a respected poet would only serve to lighten my punishment from death penalty

to life imprisonment."

"Wha—, that's no good. It's a great thing you didn't talk." Hermes changed his stand in a flash.

"..."

Kino caught the slight chuckle that the man let out after hearing Hermes' words.

With his mouth still shaped in a faint smile, the man turned to the lake and spoke, "I have thrown away my past, and lived in a nearby country. Even though a long time has passed since everything came to an end, even now, I come here from time to time, and gaze idly at this lake. Here where I once made a mistake. I have lived like this ever since I became aware of that."

The man punctuated, and while he gazed at both the sky and the lake, "In pursuit of 'righteousness', people lose sight of everything else. Even the good things and those one could not go on living without. Nothing but tragedy will be born when you forget that."

"I see. Thank you very much."

"You're very welcome. But—"

"I will not tell this story to others."

The man smiled at Kino's words.

"If so, that would be a great help. This is the first and last time I have ever told anyone about my country, you see."

---

After a few moments passed, the man said to Kino,

"At first I thought you were one of them..."

"Huh?" "Hm?"

While Kino and Hermes mulled over the meaning of the man's words, they heard the sound of an engine from afar. It was coming from the forest, and soon, a four wheel drive emerged from among the trees, quite a distance from

where they were seated. It was headed towards the lake shore, so furiously that it nearly fell into the lake.

Three men were aboard the four wheel drive. Driving it was a man around fifty years of age. At the passenger seat was an old man who looked past eighty, and the rear seat was occupied by someone still quite young, only around twenty.

The man stood up beside Kino.

"These men are my guests," he said to Kino, and walked away.

The man and the four wheel drive approached each other, and eventually, both stopped.

Kino and Hermes watched everything from a short distance.

Kino could not hear their voices, but she could make out that a conversation was taking place between the man and the old man in the four wheel drive.

After the conversation that lasted for tens of seconds, the two men seemed to have come to an understanding, and nodded at each other silently.

The old man walked towards the lake. He stood at its edge, and with his back still turned from the four wheel drive, he gazed at the blue sky and lake.

The old man in the passenger seat of the four wheel drive stood up. The youth seated behind handed him a rifle, and shot the man Kino and Hermes were talking to just a moment ago from behind.

The persuader fire reached Kino's ears.

The man, his chest pierced through by a large bullet, collapsed into the lake and sent up a huge spray of water.

And he never moved again.

—

"Good day. Travelers, I presume?"

The four wheel drive stopped in front of Kino and Hermes. The middle-aged man seated in its driver's seat greeted them with a smile.

The old man seated in the passenger seat held no expression, like that of a visionary, while the young man seated behind him showed a face wracked with tension.

"That's right," Kino affirmed.

"It seems you have talked to that man... Can I ask what it is you were talking about?"

"He told us about the country that used to be here. And that you were his 'guests'."

"I see... so he told you as well... Honestly, I would have preferred it if the story didn't reach any more ears. But it's not like I can force you, so you can just think of this as a request."

"I understand," Kino answered, and Hermes followed it with a question.

"Mister, were you out for revenge or something?"

The man answered. "I am merely a driver. This son of mine behind me, just like you travelers, is merely a witness. The only one who did this—and had *wanted* to do this—is my father here beside me."

"..."

After several seconds of silence, Kino turned to the old man.

"You must be the messenger from the country that was first destroyed, am I right?"

The old man did not even move a muscle. In contrast, his grandson's eyes widened in surprise. The old man's son answered calmly, his expression the same as before.

"That's correct. For that man and father, today is the day the war ended. For them, it was never 'a war that did not happen'."

"Oh, I see," Hermes answered.

"So long, travelers."

With these words, the four wheel drive drove away, and disappeared into the woods.

The surface of the lake, blue from the sky it reflected, was smooth except for the corpse of the man that floated on it.

Being rocked by the waves, his body slowly but steadily drifted to the center of the lake.

Kino finished up her cup of tea, then approached the horse that has lost its master. She removed its reins.

"You're free now. Go off wherever you please, without worries."

Lastly, Kino whispered these words to the horse before returning to where Hermes stood, and started his engine.

# 「Land of Cowards」—Toss-up—

Autumn: the sky was towering, sweeping. In the endless, transparently blue air, pure white clouds hung like shredded silk, drifting silently.

Beneath the sky was a park. In that park were a pond and a boardwalk, surrounded by the rows of tall buildings, and nestled in among the green of the lawn and the autumn colors on the thick trees.

The center of the park was leveled and paved with stone. Chairs and tables were set up, and the square had been turned into a large outdoor cafe. A trailer house with a kitchen was parked on the pavement, where it offered hot meals to the customers.

It was far enough away from the obtrusive buildings in the area, so the cafe was filled with soft sunlight and a gentle breeze. There were many customers idly chatting and enjoying lunch; the cafe's waiters were the only ones moving briskly, as they went about their work.

Beside one of the tables, a lone motorrad (Note: a two-wheeled vehicle. Only note that it cannot fly) was parked. Baggage was loaded alongside and on top of the motorrad's rear wheel. Sitting at the table, which was placed at the very edge of the cafe, the motorrad's rider was leisurely drinking tea.

The rider was young, maybe mid-teens, with short, black hair, large eyes, and a stern face. She wore a black jacket with a belt at her waist, and on her right hip, a hand persuader (Note: a persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) was hung in its holster.

The rider was in no hurry to finish her tea, letting the cup rest on the table as she stared up at the sky. With a deep sigh, she murmured, "what a nice place."

The motorrad asked, "Because they gave you free tea with your lunch?"

The rider nodded earnestly, "Yeah, that's part of it. What about you,

Hermes?"

The motorrad named Hermes agreed, "I guess it ended up being a good decision to flip a coin back at that fork in the road. They saw that in historical countries, the older buildings are the most interesting. Once you're done with your tea, Kino, let's go look around."

Still looking up at the sky, the rider named Kino agreed, "But just a little longer. Since we're here and all."

"What about finding an inn, Kino?" Hermes asked from the side.

"I don't want one that's too historical, formal, or expensive."

"Didn't the guard tell us that since this country is so big, it even has campsites set up in the forest?"

"But that wouldn't be any different from normal then... I want a shower with a hot bath, and snow white sheets."

While Kino and Hermes were talking, a man sat down seven tables away from them. He looked roughly in his mid-twenties, with thick, neat hair, a navy blue suit, and a fat briefcase.

The man carefully placed the briefcase at his feet, and then called the waiter over to place an order.

"Is there anything we need to buy while we're here?" Hermes asked Kino.

"Portable rations, fuel, and some liquid propellant would be good. We can save that for the last day though, since the store by the country walls was selling all of those things."

Once the waiter had left, the man gingerly touched his briefcase and stood up. As if searching for someone, he turned his head from side to side. He glanced in Kino and Hermes's direction, and momentarily made eye-contact with Kino, but he soon looked away, as if nothing had happened.

Then, leaving the briefcase on the ground, the man left. He strode quickly away from the table, and the sight of his back soon shrunk into the distance.

Clunk.

Kino planted her teacup onto the table. The cup was still half-full, and some of the remaining tea spilled out.

Kino rose swiftly to her feet,

"That was on purpose," Kino and Hermes said in unison.

Kino released Hermes's stand, and started pushing him away from the cafe. She turned on his headlight, and put on her hat.

"Can we make it?" Hermes asked.

Kino continued to push him for several seconds before replying, "Maybe. If it's not too big."

"Let's hope you're just incredibly mistaken."

"Seriously. Otherwise I wasted that tea for nothing."

---

One second later.

Behind Kino, in the center of the cafe, the briefcase exploded.

---

As the sirens wailed, ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars rolled onto the park lawn one after another, laying waste with their tires.

The scurrying paramedics stowed the groaning survivors into ambulances, which were replaced by new ones as soon as they left. Several of the other responders laid out blue sheets over the lumps of flesh that used to be people.

The police officers were spread out, taking countless pictures of the scene, carefully collecting the bomb fragments, questioning people in the area, keeping back anyone trying to enter, throwing out press members that still insisted on flashing their cameras, lining the perimeter with yellow "Do Not Enter" tape, and getting yelled at by Hermes when they tried to tape him too.

A middle-aged man, who had been tending to the injured, said to Kino, who was washing her hands at a drinking fountain, "We're sorry you had to experience this, after coming all this way. I'm glad you weren't caught in the

explosion, at the very least." Kino moved aside to let them use the fountain.

While washing his hands, he spat out, "Damn those bastards... Not again..."

"Again?" Kino asked.

"Yeah. It's a group of anti-government radicals that's been around for a while. They used to just make impractical demands, like 'Spread the wealth to help the poor', but when others wouldn't agree with them, they started bombing crowded areas. Recently, we caught a lot of the conspirators, and their activity died down, but it seems that now they've started moving again."

"You can't catch them?"

"Yeah. They're pretty slippery. —All they're doing is hurting innocent people, as if that will somehow make society change. They're just a bunch of cowards that refuse to fight fair and square" the man said, as he washed off the blood from the injured people he was helping.

---

When Kino returned to Hermes, she was met by a woman in jeans and a black jacket, maybe in her mid-twenties. "POLICE" was emblazoned on both the front and back of her jacket, and she carried a holstered 35-caliber revolver on her right hip.

"You two are the traveler and motorrad that happened to be at the scene, right? I'm Raiya, a detective."

Kino and Hermes returned her greeting.

"Did you two happen to see the man that planted the bomb?"

Kino and Hermes did not reply immediately.

Raiya spoke again, "It's fine if you didn't. You're only visiting, after all, so there's no need to —"

"We did see." "We saw." Kino and Hermes replied at the same time.

Raiya's mouth stopped moving, and she brought out several pictures from her breast pocket to show them.

They were all pictures of men of about the same age. Each of them was standing up against a wall with lines to measure their height.

"Would that man..., happen to be one of these?"

Kino looked, and then turned her head to Hermes.

"Without a doubt, right?" Hermes said.

Kino pointed at the picture second from the left, "Yeah. That's him. He had a completely different hairstyle though."

When Hermes spoke, Raiya's face clouded for a moment, and then she returned the pictures to her pocket.

"Thank you for your cooperation. This entire area is on lockdown, so please leave the park, now. Goodbye," she said, in a flat, businesslike tone. Then she turned on her heel and dashed back to where several officers and detectives were speaking.

"...Let's go. There's nothing more I can do here." Kino flipped Herme's kickstand, and started pushing him away.

While they were on the boardwalk, as soon as they were away from the hectic park, Kino spoke up, "Ah, whoops."

Hermes replied from below, "What?"

"I should have asked that police officer where to find a cheap hotel."

—

The next morning.

Kino rose at dawn. In her hotel room, which had a bed and a shower, she practiced drawing her revolver, named Canon, in front of the mirror. Then, she disassembled it for maintenance, before placing it back in its holster.

"Fuwa... Are you going to take your hot shower now?"

"I already took it a long time ago."

Kino bundled her luggage onto the now-awake Hermes, and left the cheap hotel.

Kino and Hermes rode around town, touring its old buildings.

Along the way, Kino said abruptly, "That newspaper stand just now. It said yesterday's terrorist attack killed 2 people and injured 8."

"That was a close one, huh," Hermes said, as though it wasn't anything unusual.

"If I had said something, ...maybe it wouldn't have been as bad."

"Maybe," Hermes began, "or maybe it would have made things worse. Did you see how your tea spilled over when you suddenly put it down? Besides, you can't do anything about it now."

Kino grumbled, "I guess..."

---

In the heart of the country, there was a vast lake.

Out from it, a broad river flowed through the flat countryside. The lake was surrounded by trees, such that there was not even a whisper of a breeze, and the calm water's surface reflected the colors on the autumn leaves.

A path ran along the lakefront, dotted with magnificent houses, whose vivid white walls sat right on the shoreline.

"Living between the forest and the lake, huh? Being able to enjoy nature while inside the country must be very luxurious. At the very least, they don't have to worry about wild animals or bandits."

"Looks like it's all rich people though."

Kino and Hermes exchanged, as they rode.

Shortly after noon, Kino steered Hermes off of the lakeside gravel road and into the forest. She parked Hermes and sat down next to him. She ate the sandwich she had bought for lunch as she started to boil a pot of water.

Kino slowly settled in and said, "Time for a comfy meal and a comfy cup of tea."

"Yes, after all, it's not like we're going to run into any bombers around here,"

replied Hermes.

---

After her meal, Kino started Hermes's engine again, and took one last glance to make sure she hadn't left behind any of her belongings or trash.

As Kino began to make her way out of the forest back onto the road,

"There's a vehicle. It's moving fast." At Hermes's word, they stopped.

Driving right past them, a car came in from the right side, and hurtled through the corner on their left. It was a sports car with the top down, and it flung up a thin trail of dust as it flew down the narrow dirt path. The car's driver sped away, not even seeming to have noticed Kino and Hermes.

"That was close..."

Kino slowly brought Hermes onto the road, watching the car in the distance. Past the settling dust clouds, it paused briefly in front of a house before passing through its gates.

Kino said, "Alright then, let's go this way" and turned Hermes in the direction the car had come from.

"The one driving that car just now, that was the same guy. Yesterday and today, he keeps trying to kill us," Hermes said.

Kino was shocked, and she brought Hermes to a stop again.

"There's no mistake, Kino."

"Huh..., does that make me lucky, or unlucky?" Kino murmured, as she craned her neck to look behind her.

"What are you going to do? Tell the police we found his hideout?"

"Good question..." Kino said, and then thought for a bit before continuing, "Well we're leaving the country tomorrow, and it doesn't really involve us, so..., yeah, let's go with that."

"Why?"

"Maybe we'll get a reward or something."

"I see."

Kino sped away on Hermes, kicking up dust as they rode.

On their left was the lake, on the right, the forest.

Just past a bend in the road, they entered a general store by the beach.

---

"It was you two, right? Thanks."

It was Raiya, who got out of the police car with a middle-aged officer to greet them.

They were standing outside the store where Kino had borrowed a phone, and countless other vehicles were parked nearby.

One of them was a bus with barred windows, that some of the police officers had arrived in.

The officers followed Kino into the forest, where they peered out past the bend in the road. Spying through their binoculars, they could see light peeking out from the gaps in the house's curtains.

Then, they all returned to their vehicles.

"You're certain that's the house, right? If you're wrong, we won't be able to fix things with just an apology," asked the middle-aged detective in the suit, with no hint of cheer or politeness in his voice. Kino nodded. "If we're still around" chimed Hermes.

Eventually, an officer ran up to the detective. They had checked and verified that the villa's owner was currently somewhere else. Additionally, they hadn't lent it out to anyone, and they themselves hadn't visited it in a long time.

The detective said to Kino, "Alright. The rest is a job for the police. Leave it to us."

And then, without so much as a word of thanks, the police squad marched towards their bus.

As Raiya followed after them, the middle-aged detective turned back to her

and said, "You too. Stay put."

"Wh—, why?"

Raiya argued with the middle-aged detective for a bit. She vigorously insisted on storming the scene with the rest of the police, but the middle-aged detective refused.

"How many times do I need to tell you?! A female rookie is just going to get in the way."

"But I—"

"You stay put!"

The middle-aged detective barked his final words, and then left to make preparations with the rest of the officers. The squad of about 15 officers donned bulletproof vests and loaded their long automatic rifles.

"Umm... Raiya." Kino pushed Hermes closer.

Raiya, who had stood watching the scene in shock, turned to look at Kino.

"Raiya, are they planning to raid that house right now?"

"Eh? Yeah. It would be dangerous for you, traveler, so you should stay here."

"So that's their plan..."

Kino hesitated, and Hermes grumbled out, "It doesn't hurt to try telling them, at least."

Kino agreed, and started up again, "It looks like the plan is to approach from the forest, but I don't think you have enough men to attack immediately. In my opinion, it'd be best to wait for backup."

"Eh?"

Raiya turned to fully face Kino.

"Also, I think those long rifles would be too hard to use after penetrating the house. In my opinion, it'd be best to use a rifle team as support, while the penetrating squad carries hand persuaders. Otherwise, there's a high chance of critical failure."

The middle-aged detective had finished putting on his bulletproof vest, and his face scrunched up in resentment as he walked over to them.

"Also —"

"Shut up! This is a job for the police. We don't need an amateur to go running her mouth where she's not wanted. —Raiya. Watch the traveler! Don't let her out of your sight!" he yelled at Kino and Raiya, before storming away.

"Well, that's pretty much what I expected to happen."

"...You tried to tell them, that's good enough, right?" Hermes said to Kino.

"...!" Raiya shot him a glare. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then she shook her head, "He can't even stop himself from getting angry at you two... Sorry about that."

---

The middle-aged detective gave a briefing to the line of police officers, after they had finished their preparations.

"There will probably be more than one inside, but to our knowledge, there are no more than four terrorists in hiding right now. We'll make our approach through the forest, surround the house, and then storm in. I have no expectation that we'll be able to arrest them, since they've already killed however many people, so even if we have to reduce that house to rubble, we're going to wipe them all out."

The police force entered the forest.

Raiya stood there for a while, without doing anything, but soon, she became visibly agitated. She kept moving her head around and kicking the gravel at her feet.

"...Dammit."

Then, she grabbed a bulletproof vest from one of the cars, and wore it under her jacket. She checked that her revolver was loaded, and keeping it in her right hand, she walked slowly into the forest.

And so, one human and one motorrad remained.

"What do we do now? Our detective just left."

"...Is it okay for us to just leave?"

"I don't know. But hey, since we're here —," Hermes said, "Should we watch to see if you were right? If we stand next to that curve in the road, we should be able to get a clear view."

"Sure..."

---

They could see the lakefront house in the distance, from the top of the curve.

"..." Crouched down, hiding in the trees was Raiya. She gripped her revolver tightly, staring at the house. The house was still quiet, just sitting on the edge of the lake.

Behind her came a voice, "Not yet?"

"Not yet," Raiya answered automatically, and then spun around in surprise.

Kino had pushed Hermes next to her, standing between the road and the forest.

"You don't have to be so uptight," Hermes quipped.

Kino continued, "I ran over here on my own, so you had no choice but to come follow me. How does that sound?"

"..." Raiya looked at Kino blankly, and then suddenly with a "pfft" broke into laughter. "Thanks for looking out for me."

Kino rolled Hermes a little closer so they could see better, and then crouched down next to Raiya.

Raiya continued to watch the house as she said, "Traveler. Earlier, you said there was a high chance the mission would fail, right?"

"I did."

"If that happens, do you think the terrorists might come running down this road?"

"..." Kino paused, and then asked, "Why do you want to catch him yourself so

badly?"

This time it was Raiya that paused before mumbling out, "You got me. "But that's a secret. Maybe I'll tell you later. Forget that for now —, what do you think?" asked Raiya, repeating her question.

"Let's see, I don't think it's impossible, but —"

"But?"

"If it were me, I would have picked that villa as my hideout for a different reason."

Kino spoke, Raiya turned to look at her, and a gunshot rang out from the direction of the house, quickly turning into an echoing roar as the shootout escalated. Almost like firecrackers in a side alley, the dry sound crackled in the air, together with the smoke from the bullets ricocheting off the walls of the house. The first squad rushed out together from the road toward the house, and slammed their bodies flush against the wall.

"What? They're doing just fine, aren't they?" Raiya exclaimed, half in excitement, and half in disappointment.

"I hope so..." Kino replied, and Hermes followed up, "They're up against bombers, right? And the house is right next to the lake."

As one, the first squad pushed into the house.

"Yes. What I was trying to say before was that if I were the terrorists —"

—

The house exploded.

The walls and roof were flung away in an eruption of flames. Even the police officers by the road were blown away, and they disappeared from Raiya's sight. Then came the explosion's long, low rumble, lagging just behind.

"..." Raiya was wide-eyed and speechless.

Kino calmly broke the silence, "Ahh, there it is... And they'll use a boat to make their escape."

"!" Raiya flicked her eyes to the lake. A motorboat appeared from out under the shadow of the house. The boat's bow lifted off the water as it sped away.

With its white waves slicing through the water's autumn-colored reflections, the boat tore into the center of the lake and then toward Kino's group. Soon, a single man could be seen riding the boat.

"That's the same guy again."

Just as Hermes said, it was indeed the man that had planted yesterday's bomb. Raiya made a sour face, and made sure she was still hidden in the trees.

The boat passed by them, and Kino saw that the man was laughing happily.

The man let go of the boat's rudder with his right hand and drew out a hand persuader, with his arm outstretched. He turned toward Kino and fired once, not bothering to check where the bullet landed.

"Ooh, you got shot at, Kino," Heremes said.

Kino kept following the man with her eyes, and replied, "From this range, on a swaying boat, neither one of us can hit the other."

"Too bad you're short" Hermes said, rather cheerfully.

The man turned to face forward again. The boat continued to fade into the distance, leaving behind only a white wake of foam and the stale sound of its engine.

"..." Raiya simply watched in an unmoving stupor. The boat's image mixed into the reflection on the lake, and soon disappeared.

Raiya ran to the road and cursed, "Dammit!" kicking up the rocks at her feet.

Kino asked, "...'I'm a bad sport'?"

"No, his bullet and your talent both came up short" Hermes replied.

—

The next day; that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino rose at dawn. After her usual practice, she reluctantly took one last

shower, and then put on a freshly cleaned shirt.

Kino packed up her luggage and tied it onto Hermes. She finished the preparations just before the sky fully lit up in the morning sunlight.

Kino left the room and very reservedly knocked on the door to the neighboring room.

Soon after, she was greeted by a pair of violent-looking red eyes and a mop of rumpled hair. "Ahh, morning... You're up early..." said Raiya, opening the door.

---

The cramped room could barely hold both the bed and Hermes.

Kino sat on the bed, and Raiya, who was wearing yesterday's uniform, sat on a chair, almost pressed against Hermes.

"Not very considerate of you, don't you think?" grumbled Hermes, whose luggage rack was being used as a makeshift breakfast table. Kino and Raiya shared a tray of bread, tea, and soup, with jars of butter and jam.

"A promise is a promise," Kino said to Raiya, as she tore off a piece of bread.

Raiya, spreading jam on her bread, replied, "Hmm? —Ahh, right. That's right. I said I would explain everything to you over breakfast."

She stuffed the bread into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Then, "But, you can probably already guess the majority of it. —Right?"

Kino drank some tea and then gave a slight nod.

"It's that guy, right?"

Raiya responded to Hermes with a short "yes". She wiped the crumbs off of her lap with a handkerchief, and continued, "The man that you two saw in the park the day before yesterday. And then again yesterday at the hideout. In this country, anyone can call and request information on travelers, such as the information they gave when they entered, when they plan to leave, and even what gate they plan on leaving through."

"And he might be planning to retaliate against us?"

"Uhh, close. There's no 'might be'. He fired at you yesterday to say, 'I'm coming to kill you.' You two are in serious danger," Raiya stated, washing it down with soup.

Kino brought a piece of bread with jam to her mouth, and Hermes asked, "And that's why you're vacationing with us until we leave the country?"

"Yesterday's explosion killed one, and injured almost everyone else..., including that one special moron, who has a bone fracture. The higher-ups have taken over the investigation from here."

"In the end, you didn't get to catch him with your own hands," Kino said.

Raiya nodded with squinted eyes.

"Would you be willing to tell us the reason behind it?" Kino asked, eating bread with one hand and reaching for the soup with her other. Kino held the soup to her lips and met Raiya's eyes.

"..."

Raiya didn't say anything, and Kino started drinking the soup.

Once Kino finished the soup, Raiya began, "To make a long story short, we know each other."

"..." "

"You want me to say more, right? Fine, I get it. —He grew up in the same village as me, and I knew him pretty well. He was my childhood friend. We used to play together all the time in that dirt poor village. When we were still in elementary school, at least."

Kino sipped her tea and Hermes played his role as a table, both in silence.

"When I moved away with my family to the city, I couldn't see him anymore. So when I learned that he had become a raving terrorist, I was already a police officer, and I wanted—, no, I swore to catch him myself. Otherwise, he'll be shot and killed. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes. Thank you very much," Kino said, "But even if you catch him, won't he still be put to death?"

Raiya brightened up just a little, and laughed, "This country doesn't support the death penalty. The maximum punishment is a quintuple life sentence."

"So capturing him is the only way to keep him alive, huh..."

"Yeah. Both of his parents are still alive, too. As long as he's alive..., they can see him. A lot of people have died, and many of their family members want to see him dead... I understand completely that I'm just being selfish... but still, I want to do whatever it takes to arrest him."

"So that's how it is. I understand. Really, I do, but..."

As Kino dawdled, Hermes spoke instead, "Do you really think it'll be easy to catch someone so violent and reckless?"

"I don't know" came Raiya's immediate answer. "I don't know, but... He doesn't know that I'm a police officer."

"..." Kino was silent. Hermes gave out a "hmm."

"So, what are your plans for today? I might just be a burden, but I'll follow you anywhere," said Raiya.

Kino replied, "We're leaving right now."

---

"What should we do, Kino?"

Hermes asked in a soft voice, as soon as Raiya returned to her own room to pack her luggage, Kino thought for a moment, and looked at Hermes. "If we're actually being targeted..., I don't really want to cause trouble inside the country. If she's with us, she might be able to help at least a little. If anything happens, two is better than one, right? I have no complaints, as long as we can leave the country safely."

"Makes sense. But we're probably walking into a trap."

Kino nodded, "I know. But—"

"But?"

"We just have to make sure we 'don't let our guard down', as they say.

Remember, the enemy might not be alone either."

"?"

---

"And now I'm on a truck. Just great," grumbled Hermes. "You know, I think Kino is better at handling being targeted than she is at handling a motorrad."

In the middle of the vast country, on the road between the forest and the plains, a small farming truck was driving along. Hermes was riding along with it, strapped with rope on top of the dirty truckbed.

Raiya sat in the left-hand driver's seat, wearing a rough jacket that could let her pass as a hiker. The jacket's hem fell low enough that it hid the holster on her hip. She rested her left arm on the open windowsill.

Kino sat to her right, wearing her black jacket as always. She rested her right hand by the door, holding on to "Canon".

The autumn leaves shined in the clear morning sky. The road wasn't very wide, but in the absence of any traffic, the truck chugged along peacefully with the sun shining behind it.

"When I was a kid—" Raiya suddenly started, "I used to play with him all the time. Since there weren't many other kids my age in the village."

"Was it a small village, then?" Kino asked.

Raiya was slightly surprised, and glanced at Kino. "Yeah, it was. You couldn't call it rich, even as a joke. It's a big country, so there's all kinds of different places here."

Raiya turned to face forward again. The road conformed to the forest on its left, swaying left and right as it continued. The country walls weren't in sight yet.

"You know, when we played together..."

Raiya sighed, with a bitter smile on her lips.

"?"

"Ironically enough, it was always toy gunfighting. It was during the pioneering era, when everyone was caught up in those kinds of movies. Like where they flip a coin, and draw their pistols when it lands."

"And? Who won?" shouted Hermes, from the truckbed.

"Oh? You could hear that from back there? ...Yeah, I usually—"

"Won?"

"Lost. Actually, it wasn't "usually". I never beat him," Raiya answered.

"Well that's no good," came Hermes's voice.

"It was definitely frustrating. No matter how much I practiced my quickdraw, it never worked. He was always faster at reacting to the coin landing. When I entered the police academy and held a real gun for the first time, that was all I could think about, and I pushed myself relentless when practicing."

"How about now then? Can you win?" Hermes asked.

"I don't know," was all Raiya said.

---

They stopped at a small store just off the road. It served as the general store for the nearby village, so it had a thin power cable and a telephone line.

From the western side of the country, glimpses of the border wall were visible between the gaps in the trees.

Kino stood next to the truck with a drink in her left hand, and looked out at the road. It was looked too narrow for even a single car to pass through.

Soon, Raiya came jogging back from the store. With a confused look on her face, she said, "I checked with HQ. He still hasn't been caught, and his whereabouts are still unknown..."

"I see. But we only have a short while left to go," Kino said.

Raiya smiled at Kino, "Once we get you safely out of the country, I'll think of another way. —Let me just say it now. Thank you."

Kino laughed, "You're very welcome. But it's still a little early for that."

—

They left the general store behind, and continued down on the road into the forest. The forest enveloped them, and the truck scattered away the fallen leaves.

They were nearing a curve.

"Hm?" Raiya slowed down.

Half of the road was blocked by a stalled tractor that had steam venting out of its open hood.

"..."

Raiya gripped the steering wheel tight, and a man walked out from behind the tractor.

"Ah... Oh." Raiya exhaled. It was a bearded old man, wearing overalls suited for farmwork. He noticed the truck and waved excitedly at them.

Raiya inched the truck closer and leaned her head out the window to yell, "I'm sorry sir, but I need you to move! We can't get past!"

The old man didn't say anything in response, and just kept wildly waving his arm.

"Oh come on," Raiya griped, and stopped the truck. In that moment, another man walked out and smacked the old man, knocking him out.

He then shouted, "Neither of you move!"

It was of course the bomber that had escaped yesterday, and the day before. He was dressed in black from head to toe, and he wore a holster on his right hip.

He shouted again, "If you move, you'll get blown sky high." His extended an arm to show that he was holding some kind of transceiver, with an antenna sticking out of it.

"If I hit this button, or this remote hits the ground, the charges under your truck —, well, you can figure that much out, right? Go ahead and shoot me!" The man walked toward the truck as he shouted.

"..." Raiya carefully slid her right hand off of the wheel and onto her hip.

Then, Kino said, "Shall we get off? We don't need to shoot yet. Let's try talking first."

Raiya looked at Kino in shock, and then gave a short nod.

The two of them got out of the truck, and the man strode forward, grinning with self-satisfaction.

"Long time no see, Torus."

"!" At Raiya's words, the color drained from his face, and he stopped in his tracks to stare at Kino and Raiya. They were close enough now to talk without needing to shout.

"Raiya...? Now that's a surprise. What brings you here? What are you doing...?"

Raiya slowly lifted the right hem of her jacket. On her belt were her holster and her badge.

"I'm a police officer. Right now I'm a detective working in the capital."

"..." The man's eyes went wide, and it took him several seconds to find his voice again.

"Unbelievable... But whatever. I'm not here for you." Saying that, he shot a glare at Kino. "You, traveler. Let me ask you a few things."

"No thank you," came Kino's immediate response.

The man's face contorted. His right hand shook, and the antenna with it.  
"Huh? Do you want me to detonate the truck?"

"You're bluffing. There's no way you could have set that up." That was Hermes, still tied to the truckbed.

Kino followed, "There are two possible reasons why you would be targeting us. The first is to get revenge by killing us. If that were why, though, you'd already have done it. So that's not it. The other reason —"

Raiya looked at Kino.

Kino kept going, in a flat tone, "You're trying to steal Hermes, assume my

identity, and run away. If you need Hermes, there's no way you'd set up explosives. That detonator's probably not even real."

Raiya stared at Kino. The man's face contorted again, this time into a laugh, and he tossed the remote away.

"Ah..." Raiya watched it fall, and she jumped when it clacked onto the road.

"Heheh, you got me. Then why don't you just hurry up and shoot me? Is the piece on your hip just for show?"

"For one, we're still inside the country, and you haven't drawn yet either. Also, I owe it to the person that paid for my hotel room last night."

"Hah?"

Kino glanced at Raiya, and Raiya nodded. "Let's just talk for a bit, Torus."

"About what?"

"You have too many charges against you to count, so I'm putting you under arrest."

"Hah?"

"I'm going to arrest you, put you on trial, and then put you behind bars."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's a shoot-on-sight order out for you, Torus. If you keep going like this, someone someday is going to make you look like a beehive."

"And that's why you've been tagging along with the traveler? ...Wow."

The man gave an exaggerated expression, as though he had truly been shocked from the bottom of his heart.

"Well?" Raiya prompted.

"'Well?' That's how you try to convince me?"

"You're right. Well then, what do you think?"

"Have you heard the saying? No matter where, no matter when, the last conversation always ends in violence. We're both carrying heavy burdens on our backs. It's not like I hold anything against you, but that's all there is to it."

"You're right—. Fine then, how about this? Let's decide it with a coin toss; when it lands, we draw and we shoot."

The man paused for two seconds. On the third second, he opened his mouth as if to speak, and a laugh came out instead. Still grinning, he said, "That's great! Hahaha, that is great! You are a piece of work! Let's do it! But let me remind you, you've never beaten me before in your life, remember?"

Raiya said, "And let me tell you that I let you win every single time, because I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Did you seriously think I'd buy a lie like that?"

"Oh? I'm telling the truth though. Sorry."

"I guess we'll see soon enough..."

---

Raiya slowly took off her jacket, and tossed it onto the road, unconcerned with getting it dirty.

"After I arrest you, I'll go with you to the hospital. You'll just have to put up with the pain, okay?"

"You're wrong, I'm gonna get away. This time, for good. Don't blame me if you die."

Standing in the middle of the road, amidst the autumn trees, the two of them looked as though they'd stepped out of a movie, while Kino watched, crouched down beside the truck.

Raiya pulled out a coin from her left pocket, and flipped it high into the air with her thumb. It spun upward between the two of them, higher and higher.

The man's eyes followed the coin.

Raiya's eyes did not.

She brought her right hand down to her holster and drew out her revolver, and while the coin was still ascending, she fired.

Startled by Raiya's movement, the man hastily fumbled for his own

persuader, but Raiya's bullet sank deep into his stomach.

"Gah! Guahh!"

He fell to the ground, his body twisted in pain.

The coin made a dull sound as it hit the ground.

Raiya rushed to the man's side, and punted his persuader into the brush.

"Y, you bitch..." The man glared up at Raiya and groaned.

Raiya steadied her revolver at him with both hands and laughed, "You're wearing a bulletproof vest like me, anyway, aren't you? It's not like you're going to die. Sorry if your tummy hurts."

"That was a dirty trick... You coward..."

"I don't want to hear that from you," Raiya countered, calmly.

He fainted from the pain and his head collapsed onto the ground.

Raiya turned and spoke to Kino, "Traveler, thank you. Feel free to leave now before things here get hectic. The gate's just up ahead."

"Yeah, we'll be leaving now. Let me just get Hermes down first. By the way  
—"

"Hm?"

"I can tell the officer at the gate that you caught the guy, and request backup for you."

"... Yeah, that'd be a huge help."

"Then that's what I'll do," Kino said, and turned toward the truck. Raiya followed her with her eyes, and then she brought her revolver up to aim at Kino's back.

Deep in the forest, a single gunshot boomed.

—

On the road between the forest and the plains, a motorrad ran.

"I guess you weren't too short after all, Kino."

"Hm? —Oh, yeah."

"I know you made sure not to let your guard down, but how did you react in time?"

"The truck's side-view mirror."

"I see" whispered Hermes.

"To be honest though, Hermes," Kino said, "that country was so beautiful that I wanted to relax a little longer and leave in the evening."

"Well that's new," teased Hermes.

The midday sun was still shining.

"After all, I could have refused her offer to accompany us."

"Then why didn't you? You could have just left them alone, and then you wouldn't have had to deal with her at all."

In response to Hermes's question, Kino offered, "First of all, she paid for the hotel and breakfast. Second, it was payback for the wasted tea."

A fine-tuned engine was the only thing audible on the plains for several seconds, and then Hermes replied in bewilderment, "That's way beyond 'stingy', don't you think, Kino?"

Then he continued, "I bet if she heard that, that policewoman would have said it."

"Hm? Said what?"

"You coward!"

"Ahaha."

—

The next day.

All of the newspapers in that country ran a single front-page headline.

The bomber terrorizing the populace had finally been captured.

He'd been found in the middle of nowhere, out by the west gate, by a farmer,

who then called the police to come arrest him. The man had been shot in the stomach through a bulletproof vest, and was unconscious, tied to a tree. There was still an ongoing investigation to find out who was responsible for taking him down, but the citizens were able to return to their peaceful lives.

In a strange turn of events, a female police officer was also found at the scene, also tied to a tree.

After searching her home, it was discovered that she was from the terrorist's hometown, and at the request of his family and friends, she planned to hide him in the village with a new identity, to avoid a life sentence.

She was immediately arrested as well, and although the police have remained silent in the face of this shocking scandal, pressure from the public will inevitably force someone to take responsibility.

Additionally, the woman had been shot through her own bulletproof vest with a weapon other than the man's. The identity and location of the person that shot her and tied both of them up still remains to be discovered.

# "Amidst the Rising Sun · a" — the Dawn · a

---

"You want me to be your bodyguard?"

"Yes, Kino. I believe I could count on your skills, and also because you're female. I'd like it if you could escort me and my two other friends on our journey. We're all women."

"Can you be more specific...? Where are you planning to go?"

"We intend to go out of the country to climb the mountainous regions in the east."

"How are you planning to go there? As you climb higher in the mountains, the forests will be full of nothing but snow. Do you know that?"

"We have a snow tractor fitted with caterpillar tracks. That's about the only vehicle that can ascend those snowy mountains. There's a route laid out going all the way to the east. We can use that."

"And then?"

"And then, we'll proceed along the mountainous regions through a valley. If everything goes well, we'll reach the snowy plains in three days or less. Then we'll come back. It will take seven to ten days at most."

"Is there anything so dangerous that you'd require a bodyguard?"

"Well, there are no bandits in this area. But brown bears and snow leopards are known to come out in the mountains. Countless travelers that have gone there have been attacked, so everyone was forbidden to enter the mountains on foot or on horseback. And even if you climb with a snow tractor, there's a condition that at least one in your group is skilled in firing a rifle. There shouldn't be any problems if we have with us a traveler who is used to the

outdoors. Furthermore, we are all women.”

“I see... So you picked me...”

“Yes! When we heard about you, we thought we found the person we have been looking for! You’re planning to leave the country the day after next, right? We can join you then.”

“You have everything prepared?”

“Of course! We have been saving money since ten years ago. We also trained ourselves in driving the snow tractor. All that is left is for us to employ a bodyguard and we could set off.”

“You couldn’t find anyone in this country?”

“Unfortunately, no. There are many who could be bodyguards, but they’re all men.”

“I see.”

“We’ll pay you with fuel, food, and other supplies. We’ll also provide your food and ammunition while you’re on duty.”

“Let me set that aside for the moment, and ask you one question.”

“Go ahead.”

“What about my partner?”

“Your motorrad? You can leave him here in the country. But if you don’t want that, we can also bring him along in the snow tractor. There’s plenty of space for him in the carrier.”

“Okay. I guess I can manage with that. Leaving him behind is out of the question. He’d be angry with me.”

“So will you do it?”

“I’m not promising anything. But if you tell me your plan and show me the map, I’ll give it a thought.”

“Thank you! Then can we meet tomorrow noon in your hotel? I’ll take everyone with me, and bring the plans. Of course, we’ll treat you to lunch!”

“Sure. I’ll be waiting. By the way, there’s one more thing—”

---

“In short, we’ll meet up tomorrow at lunch.”

“I see. If you’re fine with it, then so am I. Travelling in the snow isn’t so bad. I don’t mind being the cargo from time to time.”

“I haven’t decided yet. I only agreed to hear their plans.”

“So, what’s all this for? Why are they willing to go through so much trouble, and spend all the money they have saved for ten years? What are they planning to do after getting to those snowy plains?”

“I asked that too. I didn’t think there would be anything special in that kind of place.”

“What did they say?”

“I was floored. You will be surprised, Hermes. And amazed too.”

“Really? So what’s the answer?”

“Dawn.”

“Huh?”

“They wanted to see the dawn. They said they wanted to lay eyes—even once in their whole life—on the sun as it rises from the horizon.”

“What? But here—, oh right, they can’t see it from this country.”

“Exactly. The east is blocked by the mountains, and the mornings are foggy and rainy all year round. No one in this country has ever seen a sunrise since they were born.”

“And so they’ll devote ten long years all for the sake of seeing it. And to think you’ve been enjoying clear mornings your whole life Kino.”

“What’s ‘natural’ to me may not be so for other people, Hermes.”

“Kino. You were lying a minute ago, huh?”

“Eh? Which part?”

“When you said you only agreed to listen to their plans. —The truth is, you have no intention to turn them down. You wanted to show them how the morning sun looks like.”

# 「Afterword」—Preface—

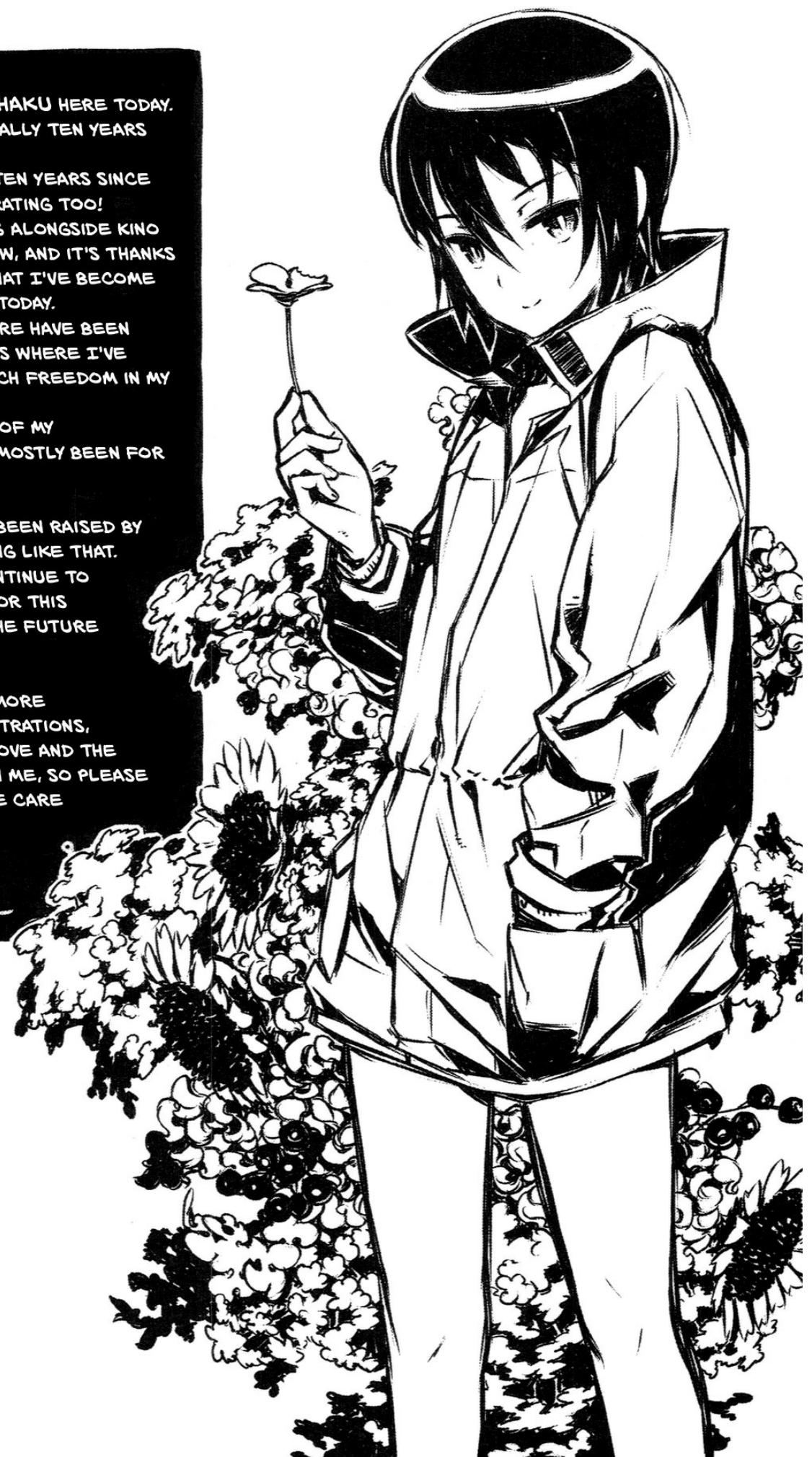
KUROBOSHI★KOHAKU HERE TODAY.  
KINO NO TABI IS FINALLY TEN YEARS  
OLD!

IT'S BEEN ABOUT TEN YEARS SINCE  
I STARTED ILLUSTRATING TOO!  
I'VE BEEN WALKING ALONGSIDE KINO  
FOR TEN YEARS NOW, AND IT'S THANKS  
TO KINO NO TABI THAT I'VE BECOME  
THE PERSON I AM TODAY.  
I DON'T THINK THERE HAVE BEEN  
MANY OTHER WORKS WHERE I'VE  
BEEN GIVEN SO MUCH FREEDOM IN MY  
ILLUSTRATION.  
I THINK THE BODY OF MY  
ILLUSTRATION HAS MOSTLY BEEN FOR  
KINO.

I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN RAISED BY  
KINO, OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT.  
I'M SURE I'LL CONTINUE TO  
FEEL GRATEFUL FOR THIS  
OPPORTUNITY IN THE FUTURE  
TOO.

I WANT TO DRAW MORE  
WONDERFUL ILLUSTRATIONS,  
CHOCK-FULL OF LOVE AND THE  
WORK'S IMPACT ON ME, SO PLEASE  
CONTINUE TO TAKE CARE  
OF ME.

KURO



To all of my readers, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting! This is the author, Sigsawa Keiichi, and this was the new volume of Kino, after about a year! The fourteenth volume!

I've been doing my best to ensure I can release a new Kino volume very October, and somehow I managed to deliver another one to you this year as well. I am currently writing this afterword while stroking my chest in relief.

As is tradition, this doesn't contain any spoiler about the main text, so please rest assured and read on.

Now let's start the afterword.

This year marks the ten-year anniversary since Kino's conception. The first volume was released in July of 2000. It was also the first book I published in my life (by the way, this is my 34th paperbook since joining ASCII Media Works).

Ten years since my debut—, I wonder if it's been a good ten years.

The things that were harder than I expected, the things that were just as hard as I expected, and the things that were so much more fun than I expected were all mixed together.

Naturally, meeting deadlines is difficult. In the month leading up to a deadline, I have no time to rest. After all, if you break the deadline and slack off on your manuscript, the book won't make its release date.

But even for homework or a graduate thesis, the fact that there's a due date is what pushes people to work their hardest, so in the same way, deadlines are a powerful driving motivator for authors. If the editing department said "Oh, just do it whenever—", I don't think a single writer would get any work done. Deadlines banzai! My battle with deadlines will continue in the future too.

Also, as long as you can stick to your deadlines, you can eat (=make money) by writing out your personal fantasies, which makes the writing industry incredibly fun.

Turning your imagination into a book, having a readership, and receiving their impressions —.

Let me also state that if one of your readers wants to become an author themselves, when they make their dreams come true, that will make you proud too.

And so, after these wonderful, mixed up ten years, I guess all I really have to say now is, "I'll continue to work hard for the next ten years too, so let's enjoy it together".

When I first wrote my application manuscript in 1999, I never could have even dreamt that I would continue writing for more than 11 years. I've said this before, but originally I thought I would finish after two volumes!

I can't help wondering and looking forward to what I'll be writing or what I'll be doing 10 years from now, in 2020 (it feels so far into the future right now, but it will probably feel just as normal then as 2010 feels now).

I'll do my best while watching my health, so I can continue to leave my name in bookstores.

Now for a few words of thanks.

To all of you readers that sent me fan mail, thank you very much.

Whenever I read these handwritten letters, I imagine the person writing them, and my heart grows warm. Sometimes, no, relatively often, I get letters that say "I'm writing this during class"... just make sure you don't get caught!

To my readers in elementary and middle school —, thank you so much for choosing to spend your allowance on "Kino no Tabi".

Now, I wrote this in the afterword for "Gakuen Kino 4" as well, but I've started a Twitter account.

Twitter is like a blog with very short posts. Even if you don't want to register, you can read my tweets at <http://twitter.com/sigsawa>.

It's summarized at <http://twilog.org/sigsawa>, so you can also access my tweets from there. The ID I use is "sigsawa".

I tweet out things such as my everyday happenings and thoughts, simple jokes, and my interactions with other authors and people in the industry.

Once in a while, I also reply to the questions I receive there. Of course, it's not a sure thing; I'm sorry if I can't answer your question due to lack of time or due to the content.

However, I do check all of the responses to my tweets. Your candid thoughts make me very happy. Please continue to take care of me from now on as well.

Finally, let me make some acknowledgments befitting an afterword.

To my artist, Kuroboshi Kohaku-sama, you have really done so much for me. I'm filled with excitement like "uwaa" every time I see your illustrations. I'm truly glad to be able to work with you.

To everyone in the editing department, everyone at ASCII Media Works, and everyone else involved in the review, printing, distribution, and marketing, I'm truly indebted to you. Thank you very much.

And so this mixed up tenth-year afterword has come to an end.

Normal afterwords are quite nice, aren't they! Even if I read this again in ten years, it probably won't make me feel ashamed, like "muwaa!" or "nuu!" It's safe and secure.

Well then, let's meet again in the next *Kino*.

October 10, 2010. Sigsawa Keiichi.

# Notes and References

1. ↑ The word *tsubuyaki* or “mutterings” also refers to tweets, as in Twitter posts. Definitely not a coincidence.
2. ↑ See this [wikipedia](#) entry for reference.
3. ↑ The three little pigs and the big bad wolf.